

The Lost Tales of Power: The Enemy of an Enemy

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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.”

Interesting, I thought. This must be one of the lieutenant's informants, and if so it would be a good thing to have him owing me. I moved to the lieutenant's computer and said, "Well, it is your call of course, but it seems to me you would not be calling here unless you needed something, and I might very well be able to find it for you."

"What string are you going to attach to it, human?"

"That is not a question I can really answer without knowing the value of what I am looking up, but let's just say that someday I may be in need of information and then you will supply it."

He seemed to ponder that a bit before replying, "All right, that seems fair. Call up the records on ... " This started me on a wild run through the computer banks until I found the information he wanted, and at the same time I stumbled on the agreement that he had with the lieutenant.

As he was getting ready to end the call I stopped him, saying, "Look, the day will come when he cannot make good on your agreement. When that day comes, find me. I can make it happen." I was mostly bluffing, but I could not pass up this opportunity for an informant.

To that he simply nodded and broke the connection. It was years later before he contacted me and told me that the lieutenant had lost his ability to fulfill the agreement and was calling in my promise. I had no idea at the time of his value as an informant. I thought I knew, but I was greatly underestimating him.

Back then at that chance introduction I could not have known how great a find he was. As I sat there pondering the information he had given me, it occurred to me that my career so far had been one lucky chance after another, almost as if someone was orchestrating a huge play in which I was a helpless puppet.

Chapter Six

From Karathlathornka's report I made a breakthrough in the problem of the Magi. It was not much, but it might be the key we needed to start making headway. Often in these cases a few small steps are made, then all of a sudden everything falls into place. I was still trying to make that happen but at least I had enough to make a start.

In the Academy we were trained to look at everything like a child's picture puzzle. Every piece of data was a new clue to be assembled in order to reveal the complete picture. I never worked this way; it was too simplistic for real intelligence work. Instead I saw everything as threads in a great tapestry in that the data we collected were not discrete pieces, but rather strands of thread, and those threads were often knotted up. Untangling them and figuring out how to weave them into the bigger tapestry would reveal the hidden truth. While working at the threads, smaller patterns could be found that would eventually make up the details in the bigger picture, and it appeared that I had found one of these smaller patterns.

I brought my report to the captain, but he insisted on waiting until the senior staff was assembled. I did not know if I was ready for this. If I was wrong this would reinforce their low opinion of me, but if I was right it could be the opportunity I needed to prove myself. It would be nice to leave them with a good impression before I departed on my suicide mission.

When I entered the conference room and looked around, the atmosphere seemed more relaxed than it had been recently. I wondered if that was because they did not expect anything I had to say to be very shocking.

Zalith had his feet up on the table, Dr. Rannor was sitting on the table looking like he should be sipping a drink, and everyone generally seemed in a carefree mood. It felt more like a social gathering at a friend's house, at least as far as the others were concerned. I felt like I was about to face the worst exam of my life and had forgotten to study. I assembled my notes and did my best to look as relaxed as they were, but without much success.

The door opened and everyone jumped to attention as the captain entered. His broad shoulders seemed to fill the great doorway as he passed through it, adding to the aura of power that he projected.

Soon everyone was seated and the captain said, "I asked Vydor to call this meeting because he has some news for us on the Magi situation. He has shared a little with me already and I think we would all benefit from hearing his presentation." He paused and looked at everyone as to say, "Give the kid a break," then said, "Vydor, go ahead."

"Thank you, Captain." I paused, took a breath and told myself that these were my peers, not a review board. I only wished I could believe myself ...

"I want to start with a review of what we know, going back to the original transmission from Lieutenant Tom. This is because I think I have found a thread running through all the events which gives us a clue to the puzzle of the Magi.

"When Zalith presented his report on Tom's message, he stated that he thought the message was tampered with because of the way Tom was acting. At the time I agreed with him. Tom, as we all knew, was a battle-hardened veteran and was acting like a green soldier who had never faced battle. After that meeting, I studied the message to see if I could verify that theory.

"It is fairly well-known that all transmitters in the Empire have a code which they transmit to identify themselves. What is not so well-known is that all military transmitters, like Tom's, have a second coded message they transmit to prevent any possibility of interference. Based on my analysis of that data, there is no way that message was tampered with. It is exactly as it was when it left the transmitter. If there was any falsehood involved, Lieutenant Tom would have had to be involved. There is no reason to believe he would knowingly have taken part, so we can only take the message at face value.

"The next thing to look at is the target the Magi picked for their move: a colony deep within the Empire's secure borders researching biological warfare. At first it sounds like a great target, because it

would be unexpected and yield some nice weapons, but not this colony. The last few reports on the colony indicate that it is a complete failure. It has never produced a single new discovery in the seventy-five years it has been in operation. What does not make sense is the colony's classification. It is rated in the highest level of biological warfare research, which is why Dr. Rannor strongly warned us against landing. From what these reports say, that project should have been abandoned and not classified so highly."

I paused here. I wanted that to sink in a bit. I had a lot more to say and I needed to gather my thoughts. I was sure they would soon start wondering about my information sources. I did not officially have the security clearance to know about the reports I had just cited, never mind study them. Heck, I was not sure anyone in this room other than Dr. Rannor did.

"The next thing to consider is the first probe we sent. The Magi could easily have simply shot it down; instead they tampered with it, changed what it would report and let it report for a while, and then shot it down. The only reason for this is that they wanted to change our perception of them in some way. If they had merely destroyed the probe, we would not have thought much about it. By manipulating what the probe reported they caused us to spend time and resources trying to deduce what they were up to, and making wild guesses about what they could do."

As I looked around the room, I noticed something I had never seen before. They were listening very closely to me. Not as if I was a green youngster, but as a peer. I certainly had their attention. Dr. Rannor was a good example of this. He always took notes when he thought something was important, and he was taking notes on my presentation. Zalith never took notes, but his piercing gaze was firmly planted on me, paying very close attention to everything I said.

"After this we sent a second probe. This probe was specifically designed to prevent tampering, and was heavily armored so that it would not be easy to shoot down. It was also transmitting data non-stop throughout its flight. This meant that the Magi could not merely manipulate the probe to convey what they chose, and it was impervious to the known planetary defenses of the colony. What did they do in response? They used a weapon that they know we cannot duplicate, and fired on the probe three times. As we agreed here, it would have been impossible for them to know that the first hit failed to destroy it before they fired the second shot, indicating that they had always intended to take three shots. When we discussed this, the captain pointed out that it was probably a tactic designed to induce fear. It was then that Zalith pointed out their lack of sensor technology."

Now it was time for me to present my conclusions. This would make or break me. I had their attention and if I messed up now it would be much harder to prove my worth in the future. If I had a future, since in a fairly short time I would be leading a virtual suicide mission.

"By now some of you may have an idea what I am leading up to, but let me present two more pieces of data that have not yet been considered in these chambers. The first is the crew's morale. Most of our crew are battle-hardened veterans, yet there is a noticeable level of fear everywhere on the ship. That does not make much sense. All the Magi have done so far is to blow up a couple of probes and repel our first attempt at invasion. Even a mighty force like the Imperial Navy loses skirmishes, especially early on in a brand-new war, or potential war. Some level of anticipation might be expected, but fear? I may not have seen as much space time as the rest of you, but I think I can fairly state that this level of anxiety is not normal.

"Add to that the strange orders from High Command, the lack of information, and the death of the captain's informant; and it starts to appear that High Command is also suffering from an unusually high level of alarm. The fear here on the ship could be categorized as fear of the unknown, but the indications are that High Command knows more than they are saying, so their fear is that of a known force."

I paused to gather myself. The silence in the room was deafening, almost entreating me to continue. "There is one more piece of information which I think ties this all together. What I am about to disclose comes from a reliable but unofficial source. I travel a lot in intelligence circles, and so I meet people, and perform favors which are paid back with information. I believe this to be accurate. I trust this source.

“The Magi are not a new hostile force. They are an experimental research group into the art and science of psionic warfare. I know, you have probably all heard the various conspiracy theories and think them groundless, but add up what we know so far and it becomes apparent that the colony has launched a devastatingly subtle weapon against us, that of psychologically-induced fear. They are researching biological weapons, but not the kind we assumed; the so-called bugs in this case are people, a group that goes by the code name Black Adders. They were sent there secretly to focus solely on psionic warfare and attempt to prove or disprove the viability of such a weapon, and I would say they were successful in their endeavors.”

That wrapped up what I had to say. I was unsure what to do next, when the captain spoke up. “Vydor, they told me you were the best, and that you could find connections and link data which others missed, and they were certainly right.”

I sat down and waited to see what would be the reaction of the others. Dr. Rannor was reviewing the notes he had taken. Larath was finding some reports on his personal computer, and Zalith looked lost in thought.

Larath was the first to respond. “Sir, I have to say, with regard to Vydor’s statements about the crew, I must agree. I am looking at the reports from my staff, and an illogical level of fear is being reported. I can think of no good reason for this.”

“Dr. Rannor, what is your opinion on the colony?” inquired the captain.

“Well, Captain, I have heard some rumors about a colony such as Vydor described, but I had rejected them as silly. His assessment of the colony as a failure is an accurate one, based on reports which I have no idea how he could have seen. In my studies of biological warfare I have turned up no new discoveries accredited to Arken IV. In fact, I had never heard of the colony until this mission,” answered Dr. Rannor.

“Zalith? Your thoughts?” prompted the captain.

“I have to admit Vydor’s theory sums up everything very nicely, and I would agree with his conclusion based on the given information. This leaves us with a problem. The Magi have at least one powerful plasma cannon, and the ability to sow fear. Either of those weapons by themselves would be dangerous, but combined they make a deadly mixture,” was his reply.

“Does this change our commitment to send in troops?” asked Commander Jones.

“Our orders are not conditional upon anything, so no. It is safe to conclude that High Command knows about the Black Adders, and that’s why they do not want us to bring the fleet in any closer than needed. I assume they are counting on Vydor’s reputation for reasoning to defeat the fear weapons, since the Tom’s boldness apparently failed,” answered the captain.

“But why did High Command keep this information from us?” asked Dr. Rannor.

“Well, fear of the unknown is something we all have experience of; we all know how to deal with that. Fear as a weapon only works when you can remove the person’s ability to deal with it. They are probably assuming that we have a better chance of winning if we do not know what we are facing, as odd as that sounds,” answered Larath. “The big question we need to be concerned with is how to fight this fear weapon.”

“I am not sure. I cannot find any reliable information on how to counter psionic warfare. We are all trained to deal with fear, but Tom had that same training, and it did not help him,” I answered.

There was some brief chatter regarding various rumors and theories about psionic weapons, even a few references to myths and legends from days so far back that no one can place them.

“Captain, I need your permission to select a replacement to take over my post,” I began.

“Do you think you’re not coming back?” interrupted Larath. “If you leave with the intention of failure, then you will surely achieve it.”

Commander Jones interrupted, “That is a good idea, Vydor. If the mission is a success you are likely to be gone at least a few months.” I noticed he did not address the question of the mission failing.

“Months?” I was a bit shocked by that assessment. “I figured several weeks, but not much more than that.”

“Yes. If you are successful at making first contact, then I will need you as part of the negotiations when I arrive. In most cases the person who makes first contact is the person most able to smooth over negotiations. After we have built up formal communications, you could return to your post here, but that often takes several months,” answered Commander Jones.

“Oh, come on! First we take a top officer and send him on a suicide mission, and now we are talking about disgracing him with a desk job? Is nothing sacred any more?” boomed Zalith.

The assembled officers really were unhappy with this mission and how it was being handled by High Command. Combine that with the fear everywhere on the ship and things could start to get explosive. The captain sat back and watched. He looked so calm in the face of all this. How did he do it?

It was officially my meeting, so it was up to me to try to control it. “Gentlemen, please. Enough of this. I appreciate the concern for my honor and wellbeing. I completely understand the risks of this mission. As of now no one understands our enemy better than me, and I am not looking for a way out. The Emperor has decreed that I lead this mission, and that is enough for me. I need not know what his plans are or the part I will play in them. If by my death or life I can serve the Empire, then I shall do so.”

I paused a moment and looked around the room. My comment affected them in different ways. Larath, as always, had a look of encouragement about him. It was that look that he used to keep himself from ever showing any emotion. The captain and Zalith both regarded me with knowing pride on their faces. It was as if they looked at me and saw younger versions of themselves. Commander Jones maintained a completely unreadable posture and face. The big surprise was Dr. Rannor. He had an odd look on his face; it was a sad look, but more than that. It was as if he was looking into the future and what he saw depressed him. He must have known something that he had not shared, but what could it be, and why hide it?

“If there is no further information, or questions, I have a team to prepare to run without its leader for an unknown length of time.” I paused here to see if anyone had anything to say. Since this was my meeting, protocol demanded that I be the one to wrap it up. “Okay then. This meeting is adjourned.”

As everyone started to clear out, the captain grasped my shoulder from behind and said, “Vydor, wait a moment. I would like to talk to you in private.”

He waited for everyone to leave, and then gestured for me to sit across from him. He paused for what seemed like years. Then in an uncharacteristic, fatherly tone, he started to speak.

“Vydor, you are a fine officer and a valuable member of my team here. Since you came on board you have gone well beyond the call of duty in everything you have done. You have worked very hard to prove yourself worthy of the tremendous honor of your position here. I will admit I had to be talked into letting you on to my team. You were not my first choice; in fact, you were not even on my list of possibilities. However, since you came on board, I have watched you. I have watched how you work with your teams, and how they view you. I have read every report produced by anyone under your direct influence, and I have kept on top of everything you have done from the beginning. You have certainly shown yourself to be worthy of the great chance you got when you were offered this position.

“Now that you are leaving us for a while, I would like to give you a bit of advice on what to do with your teams before you go. In your desire to prove yourself, you are overworking your teams a little. Before you assign a replacement, go over your rules and regulations and add a little more flexibility and leniency. People tend to work better when they have some room to maneuver.

“When you do select your replacement, don’t pick the best man for the job; instead choose the one whose leadership style most closely resembles yours. This will reduce the amount of retraining you will have to do on your return.”

The captain paused here a minute, as he decided what to say next. I knew him well enough to be silent while he worked it out. “Vydor, I must say I am a bit concerned that your pride may be driving you to take this mission. You lack experience and really do not know what it is like to face

death. You will be leading a very dangerous mission, and every member of that team's life will be in your hands. I want them all back safely. Do not take any foolish risks just to prove yourself to us. Returning alive with all of your team will be enough."

"Captain, I have faced death." I paused to gather myself. "I have faced him in a very intimate way. In our first round, he won. We brought every weapon and tool that the Empire could muster against him, and lost. Now I am locked in a stand-off with him. I can see him down the corridor of time. He stands ready to do battle again, patiently waiting, knowing that the clock always runs in his favor. While I may not have a huge amount of combat experience, I am all too familiar with death."

"You are referring to your father, and the disease you are destined to get. Good, I am glad you realize that. A healthy respect for death is a good thing to have on a mission like this. Do not look so surprised; I make it my business to know my staff. Your family line is plagued with Betalian's Syndrome. Every male in your family has died from it. In fact, I also know that you are the last of your bloodline."

I was continually surprised by the captain's ability to learn things he was not authorized to know. Personal medical histories like mine were not intended to be generally known, in order to prevent discrimination in assignments. But he was completely right. It was just a matter of time before I too got sick like my father.

"Vydor, before you leave pay Dr. Rannor a visit. No, I am not worried about your health, but about his. You see, he is the reason you are here."

To say that remark surprised me would be an understatement. I knew that High Command had sent orders ahead to secure me this position, but it never occurred to me that the ship's doctor would even know my name, never mind be the reason for my acceptance.

"As you know, High Command sends out recommendations for crew replacements whenever positions open up in the fleet. What you may not yet have learned is that most of the time, most captains ignore them and choose whoever they think best. High Command makes its decisions based on records, while captains make their decisions based on their personal knowledge of the officers. When your recommendation came down the line I intended to reject it, but Dr. Rannor piped up in your defense.

"He was very convincing, singing your praises and telling me that there was no one better in all the Empire for this position. I was amazed by this, as he has never done anything like that before or since. Based solely on his recommendation, I accepted your assignment to my staff. I thought that you wouldn't last more than a few days and I could appease him and then be rid of you. But to my surprise, you turned out to be all that he said you were. You lack only experience, something you're about to get a big dose of.

"I am worried that if something should happen to you on this mission, he will take it hard and blame himself. So please stop by his office as soon as you can and see what you can do about that."

With that, the captain left the room.

Chapter Seven

I just sat there for a while, I do not know how long. This new information from the captain must relate in some way to the puzzle of the Magi. In my mind I could see many threads all tangled together. There had to be a way to untangle them and weave them into a tapestry that would explain everything. I was sure it was just a matter of time before I loosened enough threads to see the outline of the pattern, and could start to weave them properly.

When I got up and left the room, the honor guard was still dutifully at their post. Since I had called the meeting, they could not leave until I dismissed them. Once dismissed, they secured the room and walked off in perfect lockstep. Their dedication to perfection was amazing. With all that was going on, it was heartening to see them so calmly going about their duties. Most of the ship was plagued by the fear weapon, yet these two were seemingly unaffected by it. I set this thread aside to be considered later. There was too much I needed to do now to get ready for my mission.

I headed to the common mess hall where crewmen of all ranks mingled off-duty over food and refreshments. I found a dark table in the corner and covered it with my work to discourage anyone from approaching me. The rule changes did not take long. I had already considered some adjustments, so it was more a matter of drawing up the official documents and placing the orders. Before I left I would have to schedule a department-wide meeting to announce these changes.

Instead of moving on to review my officers' records, I found myself once more focused on the tapestry of the puzzle. It seemed to call me in; I could not let it go. It had taken a while to get to a point where I could start working with the threads of information, but now that I had something to work with, my confidence of success was much greater.

I sat there staring blankly at piles of records, working in what my father used to call "puzzle-solving mode," hyper-focused directly on the puzzle at hand almost to the exclusion of everything else. I have been accused of not even breathing when I am working this hard. I had not gotten very far before Larath came to the table.

"Hello, Vydor, mind if I join you?" he asked as he sat down. Clearly he was not really looking for permission. "I see you are lost in thought, no doubt about the upcoming mission and the Magi."

"You know, Larath, sometimes you have amazing insight into people and seem to read minds - and other times you are the master of stating the blindingly obvious," I responded with a big grin.

"They are one and the same. It often just takes a change in perspective to see what others are blind to."

"Perhaps that is so, but you did not come here to trade quips. I perceive you have something on your mind?" I was bluffing. I could never read him, but it was odd for him to appear at my table.

He grinned and said, "Now who is stating the obvious? You are right, of course. Vydor, I know we have not served together for long as yet, but hopefully by now you have learned to trust me as a friend."

He paused here; he was leading up to something. Because of the nature of my position and rank on this ship I was required to see him regularly for psychiatric evaluation, and through those visits I had learned a bit about his style. He was a master at getting people to talk about their deepest secrets. I had often wondered if he would be willing to train my officers, as his methods would be a major help in interrogations.

"Officially, I am here to make a final evaluation before we are committed to this mission. Unofficially, I am here to offer you a way out. I heard your speech in the meeting, and I know that when you said it you fully believed it, but you were under the pressure of the meeting and the desire to prove yourself to us. In such situations, people may later regret taking so strong a stand and wish they had a way out. As your friend, I am here to offer you one.

"You see, if I declare you unfit for this mission, then the mission is off, and the captain shoulders no blame, as I would be overruling him. Your name would also be clear, since you can lodge a formal complaint and appeal my ruling. This of course would take many weeks to process, and by

that time we would have been forced to wipe out the Magi, ending the need for you to fly this mission. All you have to do is let me know that you want out, and I will take care of it. There will be no record of your request, just my assessment saying that you were not psychologically ready for such a mission. Nice and neat, and no one has to take a fall.” He stopped here and waited for my reply.

“If you know me as well as you claim, you know my answer to that,” was my response. I was being very careful not to give him anything he could use to remove me from this mission. I needed to go or I might never solve this puzzle.

“You are right, I do. Originally you were serving out of faithful loyalty and whatever mission was tossed your way you would blindly accept. But that has changed. Now you are so tied up in solving this mystery that you cannot see anything else. To you, this has gone beyond a mere act of loyalty or an attempt to prove yourself. Instead, it’s a challenging puzzle that cries out for an answer. I doubt short of tossing you in the brig I could stop you from going at this point.”

Amazingly, his insight into me was better than my own. He was right, although I was not sure when this change had taken place. I was no longer afraid of the mission, and in a strange way actually looked forward to it. “Okay, Larath, since I am bound on a suicide mission your secret will be safe with me. How do you do it? What is the secret to your insight?”

That actually seemed to catch him a bit off his guard; I had finally got one up on him. I wanted to move the conversation away from my evaluation, to ensure I said nothing to give him reason to think he should cancel my mission. It only lasted an instant, but it was a small victory for me.

“Have you not heard the rumors? I am a mind-reading amphibian from the Outer Colonies,” he replied with a big grin, masterfully not answering the question at the same time as seeming to answer it.

“No, I have not heard that one. Are you a telepath? Look, Larath, I am about to face an enemy who may have paranormal powers. If you have any information on these powers, I really need to know.”

He said nothing for a minute or two. I could see he was deciding how to answer, but nothing could have prepared me for his reply.

“No, I am not. I am an empath, as are most of the top counselors in the fleet. This means I can read your feelings which, allied to my training and experience, is almost as good as being a telepath.”

I just sat in silence. Up to this mission, I had thought all this psychic stuff was silly children’s fantasy and not worth my time studying. I realized that might turn out to be the biggest mistake of my career.

“The Empire has been actively seeking and training anyone they can find with empathic powers and, yes, there are some telepaths. All anyone in the Empire can do is read minds, until now at least. The Magi, or more likely the Black Adders, seem to have learned how to project thoughts, and in a big way.”

“You said the Empire was actively training people. I assume this includes a defense against this kind of attack?”

“Yes, but until now it has never been tried against someone who projects thoughts, because there was no such person. Fortunately the defense does seem to work. In fact, that is how I have managed to keep my cool throughout this crisis. The next obvious question is how, so let me answer it. To block an empath you need to take hold of your emotions and bury them behind a stoic cover. It takes much dedicated practice to do this on a consistent basis, but once you learn it you can still experience the full range of emotions while appearing to have none. Blocking a telepath is much harder; you need to learn to cover your thoughts with a shield. I don’t know how it works, nor am I very good at it. Some people seem to be born with that ability and merely need coaching to do it.”

“Can you teach me to block this fear weapon of theirs?” I asked.

“In the time that we have left? Probably not. But I can give you some basic starter skills to work on, and if you have the gift you should be able to work it out with time and practice on your own. If not, no amount of training will prepare you for the level of skill you must have to wage battle with down there.”

“Fine. Can you come by my quarters at 0600 hours?”

“Certainly. Let me ask you something, do you feel the weapon any longer?”

Oddly, until he said that I had not paid much attention to it. He probably knew the answer already, but I played along. “No, I do not. I’m not sure when that happened, but I get the feeling you’re going to tell me it was when I began to approach this like a challenging puzzle.”

“Yes. Very good, you have completed your first lesson successfully. Tomorrow we can work on more advanced material. Oh, by the way, Dr. Rannor asked me to deliver the order for your pre-mission physical. One wonders if he plans to offer you a way out too,” he said with his trademark big grin. “I must be moving on now. I look forward to our meeting in the morning.” With that he left.

Yet more threads for the puzzle. What did he mean by “I have already completed the first lesson?” How long had the Empire been employing psychics? Besides counselors, what other positions were they in? The possibilities were endless and frightening. Were there more cells out there like the Black Adders just waiting to crack? Was Pandora’s box already open?

Well, that mystery would have to wait. Right now I needed to announce my replacement to my team leaders, distribute the policy changes and then go to see Dr. Rannor. I gathered up all my work and sent a message out to all my team leaders to meet in my office.

Chapter Eight

As I walked to my office I paid close attention to my crewmates. I wanted to see how each was dealing with the fear. Most of them looked like they were struggling to focus on their work, but holding it together. Some just wandered in a daze, and a select few seemed to be so intently focused on what they were doing that the ship could be on fire and they would not notice. Like the honor guard, they seemed to be completely unaffected by the fear weapon.

As I approached my office I saw that some of the team leaders were there already. "Hello, gentlemen," I said as I passed them to unlock the door. Once inside everyone filed into his place. Unlike the very formal atmosphere of most officers' meetings, I tried to keep mine as casual as I could. There was no large table to sit around, just a collection of chairs with end tables. I always had some refreshments, and kept the lighting at a comfortable level.

Once everyone arrived and was seated I let them chat a bit amongst themselves. There were seven of them in all. To an outsider they must have looked like exact clones. All of them were perfect products of the best training that the Empire had to offer. Each had their strengths and weaknesses, but that was not apparent until you had worked with them for some time.

When I took over the department it was a much more linear structure, and officially it still was, but I did not run it that way. Instead I set it up so that each team leader was equal in rank and authority, with complete jurisdiction over their own team. Any conflict between leaders would be settled in a meeting like this with myself as the final authority if needed. Officially I still had to give them linear ranks, so I just named each team a color of the rainbow and their rank followed the color order: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

"Okay, gentlemen, let's get this meeting started," I began, then gave everyone a moment to settle in. "First of all, thank you for coming at such short notice, especially those of you I had to wake up." Since the department was required to function around the clock some of my team was asleep at any given time.

"There are two things I need to go over with you. The first is some rule and policy changes. I have already sent them to each of your message boxes for you to review in detail. The changes are fairly minor. I increased team cycle times to accommodate a longer rest cycle, shifted the balance of the reward and punishment system to give a bit more weight to the positive side, and a few other things of that nature. I do not want to waste our time going over that right now. When you get back to your offices you can review them and send questions in if need be.

"The second thing I need to discuss is the primary reason for this meeting. The Empire is sending me on a mission and I will be gone for an extended period of time. In fact, if the mission is successful, it could be several months before I can return to this post."

"Sir, it seems a bit unusual for a ranking officer to be sent on such a mission," interrupted red team's leader.

"Yes it is, but these orders come from the Emperor himself. Everything about this mission is highly unusual. I cannot tell you much about it, but I do need to say that the mission is extremely dangerous. Therefore I must appoint my replacement, not only for the time I am away but also in case I do not return."

I looked around the room. I knew that whichever choice I made would have the potential to cause jealousy from those not chosen. I remembered one of my professors explaining that in this kind of situation it is best if everyone else can be convinced that they made the decision. The trick would be getting them to make the same decision I had already made.

There was no doubt in my mind that red team's leader was the best choice. From the first day I worked with him I knew he would replace me. He was a natural in his position, and well-liked by his teammates. I hoped I would not have to steer them to that realization, but rather that they would get there by themselves.

“Well, team leaders, you know each other well by now, as well as I do if not better. I would like to hear from you. Who do you think will make the best replacement for me?” This was where I would find out if all the work I put in encouraging honest and open communications had any real impact.

Unlike the typical, rigid structure of command teams, everything about my department was designed to be loose and casual. I hated all the formality of my job. It just got in the way of getting the job done and had a stifling effect on creativity and imagination, which were critical to my line of work. That was one reason I used colors to name my officer ranks instead of the official ranking system. It helped cover up the rigidity of the system a bit and allowed my officers to forget that there was a strict line of command.

“Sir, I think I can speak for all of us when I say that the best person for that position is Red,” replied Green.

“Anyone else have an opinion?” I asked, somewhat shocked at how easy that had been.

“Sir, Green is right. Red has out-performed all of us in your tests and challenges, and has a good, level head on his shoulders,” replied Blue.

“Well, Red, what do you have to say about your peers’ recommendations?” I asked.

“I am honored by their respect and compliments but no one could replace you, sir. If I am chosen I will do my best to serve as well as you have,” replied Red.

“Are there any comments against Red’s appointment? Speak now; you will not get another chance. I leave in less than forty-eight hours.” I waited, but received no reply. “Very well, then. Effective in forty-eight hours, Red will take my place. I will let him choose his own replacement as Red leader after he takes over.

“The mission I am about to embark on carries a high risk of capture by a hostile force. While we all like to think that we could never be forced to give up the secrets we hold, the reality of modern day drug-induced interrogation is that everyone can be broken. Because of this all my access, all secure passwords, all encryption keys, and so forth must be changed immediately after Red takes over. Furthermore, I will not be contacting any of you for any reason. All communications from me will be directly to the captain. If you do receive a communication from me it will be a signal that I was captured. Inform the captain immediately. He will know what to do.”

“Sir, you do not expect to return, do you?” asked Red.

“Well, the odds are stacked pretty highly against me right now, but that will not stop me from doing all I can to complete the mission successfully.” I paused a moment, then plowed on. “The appointment of Red will stand uncontested until such time as it is determined that I am dead. If that should happen, a different replacement for me may be chosen, and if that is the case it is likely to come from outside our department. I am telling you this now so that if it happens you do not see it as a reflection on you. High Command prefers to bring leaders in from outside a given department in order to keep ideas and methods fresh and new.

“Inform all your teams that we will be having a department-wide meeting at 1800 hours tomorrow. I will be announcing Red’s promotion there. Until then do not speak of it outside these chambers to prevent the rumor mill from going into overdrive.

“That will be all for tonight. Everyone other than Red is dismissed.”

After goodbyes and well-wishes were exchanged and everyone had left the room, I locked the door and turned off all internal recording. What I planned to talk about was not something I wanted on record.

“Red, I guess that title no longer fits. Lieutenant Commander Peter is more appropriate. As you will be taking my position, you will need to be more fully briefed. Soon the captain will be looking to you to solve the problems that we currently face.

“The mission I will be leading is codenamed Quiet Storm. I will be leading a small assault force to penetrate the planet where the Magi are at present, with the goal of establishing a foothold there. I have prepared a data disk for you with all the information that we have on the Magi, and the logs of all the command meetings about them to date. You should know that this is considered a suicide mission, and our last chance to prevent war with the Magi. A war with the Magi could be a very bad thing. They

have displayed technology that is at least a century beyond what we have reached. I do not need to tell you what that means for our chances of winning such a war.

“You will know the success or failure of my mission in about two weeks. The captain has orders to destroy the planet if I am not successful. If at any point he launches this attack you will know that he has reason to believe I have failed and am probably dead.

“High Command believes that the Magi are presently contained on this planet only, and if that is true the war can be won there. If the captain’s attack fails, we can expect a full retaliation from the Magi, and we really do not know what that means yet. I would say we have good reason to think that we would suffer many casualties.

“As you know I always look for a backup plan, and in this case you are it. Do you recall all the cycles of decryption challenges we did, especially the one I called the Duck Code?”

“Yes, sir. As I recall no one, not even the central computers, ever cracked it,” he responded.

“Also on that disk is a complete explanation of the Duck Code, including how to encrypt and decrypt it. It is actually a fairly simple code. But it is specifically designed to take advantage of a weakness I found in our decryption methods. Because of this, no computer in the Empire can decode it; it has to be done by hand. I am giving you this code so that if I should need to contact you, you will know it is from me. Of course, there will always remain the possibility that I have been captured and broken. You will just have to do your best to determine that for yourself. Do not share the Duck Code with anyone; do not even admit knowing of its existence, ever. After you have memorized it, destroy that disk completely.”

He took the disk and stared at it for a long while, then slipped it in his inner jacket pocket. After that I gave him some advice on how to run the department and how to choose a new red team leader, then sent him on his way. It was getting near the end of Dr. Rannor’s shift, and if I hoped to catch him I would have to move quickly.

Chapter Nine

I made my way quickly to Dr. Rannor's office in the medical wing. I wondered why he wanted to see me. Larath's suggestion that he planned to offer me a way out did not seem likely; he was not the type to get mixed up in games of deception and politics. Well, if nothing else it gave me a good excuse to meet with him as the captain had requested.

As I entered his office, the ensign behind the desk snapped to attention and stood there silently. "As you were, Ensign. I am here to see Dr. Rannor," I said, remembering that junior officers were not permitted to speak unless spoken to, a rule I had done away with in my department. All this formality just got in the way of getting anything done.

"Sir, he is with a patient," was his concise reply.

"That is fine. I will wait here until he is finished," I said. I sat in one of the chairs provided for waiting patients and began to think about the Magi again. This mystery kept growing more and more complex. I began to focus more and more deeply on all the threads of information I had, slipping into puzzle-solving mode. I continued by building a wall of thought around my mind to block out distractions, and once that was set up I began to deeply focus both my subconscious and conscious mind on the problem.

Once in this mode, I lose almost all connection to the outside world and that nearly got me killed once. I was working on some puzzle as a small child when our home caught fire. I never heard the alarms, or felt the heat. The only memory I have of it is my mom screaming as she ran out of the house with me in her arms. Because of that, I learned to save a bit of my attention to watch and listen for trouble around me.

I do not know how long I had been working on the mystery of the Magi when I heard alarms sounding. I was extremely deep into the puzzle but for the first time ever I successfully managed to separate my awareness of my surroundings from the puzzle solving. It was very odd. I could see everyone running, and hear commands being called out, but everything was going very slowly. I knew it would take me at least thirty, if not forty-five seconds to fully come out of my deep focus, and I saw Dr. Rannor coming towards me. As my brain became more aware I stood and walked towards him. Out of the corner of my eye I saw all the color leave the ensign's face as he attempted to stand up, without much success. Slowly the world started to come back up to normal speed and I heard Dr. Rannor call out, "CANCEL ALERT! EVERYONE STAND DOWN!"

I realized the alarms had stopped ringing. Suddenly, without any warning, a feeling of déjà vu hit me with the intensity of a tidal wave. Instinctively I grabbed a hold of that memory thread and started to follow it when I was struck by an agonising feeling, like liquid ice pouring through my veins. The intense pain threatened to break my concentration on that memory.

"Pain is but an illusion, the mind is the master of the body," I chanted to myself over and over until I had control of the pain. I could not let go of the memory thread, and I chased it to a locked door. "A door is merely a temporary obstacle; a lock is but a pattern begging for a solution," was what I found myself chanting next. I had no idea where either chant came from, but that was the least of my worries. I needed to open the lock and see where the thread led. The lock proved too simple to stand up to me. I opened it and suddenly I was transported back in time ...

"Academy-Level Ensign Vydor reporting for my yearly physical, sir!" I stated as I stood at attention at the front desk.

"Have a seat, Ensign. The doctor will see you when he can," said the officer behind the desk.

This was likely to take a while; they did not attach much importance to ensigns' physicals. It was probably done on purpose to teach us humility or patience. This time I had come prepared to occupy myself while I waited.

I had managed to find a contact that could get me real encrypted messages from the communications systems of the Empire. I used them to keep my mind sharp, especially during breaks. So far most of them had been boring messages about fleet positions and the like. This would be

extremely useful if anyone was trying to mount an attack on the Empire, but to me they were much more interesting as decryption problems. This latest code was much more complex than the others. I had been working on it for a few days now without any real progress. As I began to focus on it, tiny pieces of it started to emerge, but nothing that made much sense. Whatever it was, it was certain to be more interesting than what I had intercepted so far.

Before I could get much further I heard alarms going off. I began to work my way back out of the puzzle. It usually took me forty-five seconds to a minute to return to full awareness. As I emerged from my deep focus, I realized I was on a stretcher with crewmen barking orders all around me. I started to sit up. A mask was pushed on to my face ...

The thread of memory ended there. I awoke in Dr. Rannor's office on his couch. He was sitting at his desk with a syringe ready to use, watching me with a look of concern on his face.

"So you've finally decided to return to the land of the living," he said.

"How long was I out?" I asked, still trying to regain my senses.

"Which time? I guess in total around thirty minutes," he replied.

"Um, Doc, what do you mean 'which time'? Perhaps it would be best if you told me what happened," was my reply.

"Well, I am hoping you can answer that better than I can. Shortly after you arrived your medical alert patch broadcasted an emergency message. According to your vital signs, you were dead. No heart rate, no brainwaves, no sign of life at all. You had been dead for about eight seconds when I came out of my office and saw the resurrection team scrambling to get their equipment and reach you. After you had been dead about ten seconds you stood up and started to walk towards me. All your vitals were still below detectable levels. Then at about fifteen seconds one by one your vitals came back slowly; by about thirty seconds your patch was reporting all was normal." He paused here as if he did not believe his own words. "After that your vitals spiked off the chart: heart rate, respiration, all at extreme levels. You started to collapse in front of me, but I managed to catch you. I heard you say something, but I couldn't make it out. It sounded like a chant. Then according to your patch you died again. This time however, I was close enough to see you were not really dead. Your breathing and pulse were much weaker than normal, but functioning. I removed your patch and laid you on the couch to recover. That was about thirty minutes ago." A big, friendly grin broke out on his face as he said, "Now, I think you have some explaining to do. The ability to die and come back is something you really should let your doctor know about."

The medical alert patch was something that all officers and mission-critical staff were required to wear. It constantly monitored their health and reported back to the medical personnel. The idea behind it was that those most critical to the survival of the fleet needed to be monitored constantly to ensure the fleet's safety. For example, if one of the navigators collapsed while on duty, he would need to be replaced immediately in order to assure the fleet stayed on a safe path.

"Well, Doc, obviously I was not dead. I assume it happened because of how focused I was on what I was doing," I replied.

"Let's go through what happened together and see if we can make sense of it. You checked in with the receptionist, and then ...?" he prompted.

"He said you were with a patient and I told him I would wait. I found a comfortable chair to sit in and wait for you." I did not want to go into too much detail until I had had a chance to work it out myself.

"Look, Vydor, this room is secured and nothing we say is being recorded. Patient-doctor confidentiality is paramount here. If you are randomly dying and coming back I cannot allow you to return to duty, never mind lead a critical mission. So you have to open up a bit more," he said.

I had to admit he was right. "Well, Doc, as I said I was not dead. I did not realize that the medical alert patch would react the way it did. In fact, the reason I am reluctant to explain is that I don't fully understand it." How could I explain this without sounding like a nutcase? "After I sat down, knowing I had to wait a while, I began mentally working on all the data I have related to the Magi problem. When I work on a complex problem with a lot of interrelated information that seems to lead

nowhere, I often drop into a deep focus. My father called it ‘puzzle-solving mode;’ he was a computer man, so everything had names like that. While in this mode, I cut off most outside stimuli that might distract me, leaving just enough awareness to recognize and react to possible danger - in this case, alarms going off.”

“Okay, it sounds like some kind of deep meditation. That might explain the alert going off, so let’s set that aside for a moment. After the alarms went off, you stood and walked towards me, then your vitals spiked off the charts. What happened there?” he asked.

“As I walked towards you a memory was triggered, and I decided to follow that trigger and see where it went. As soon as I did I felt an extreme pain, like someone had poured ice-cold acid in my veins and was pumping it through my system. I am sure that is when you recorded the spike in my vitals ...”

“A memory block?” he interrupted.

A memory block was something the Empire normally used only when people retired from key positions. They blocked out all sensitive information that the person might have so that in their older, weaker state there would be no risk of them releasing critical secrets. Typically people who had one did not even know it, and never searched for those memories again. But if they did, they would be discouraged with extreme, though harmless, pain. If they did get through that they would find the memory was secured behind a psychological barrier.

“Yes, Doc, but I was able to get a grip on the pain and continue to follow the memory through to its completion. But why would there be a block in my mind?” I asked.

“I have some suspicions. But first, what memory was blocked?” he asked.

“Well, nothing too exciting, but I guess this happened once before. Basically it was the same as this event, without the memory block. I was a young ensign in the academy waiting for my annual physical, and to pass the time I was working on decrypting some messages I had brought. The alarms went off that time too, but before I could bring myself out of it, they had me on a stretcher and put me out through a mask on my face. It’s a memory that would have been useful today, but I do not see what ... oh ... the message.” I just trailed off as I remembered something.

“Go on, what about the message?” Dr. Rannor prompted.

“The message I was decrypting I had acquired from a contact who assured me it was from the highest level of Imperial communications. I did not finish decoding it, but I did get a phrase and some numbers. But it cannot be, can it?” I grabbed my pad off the end table where I assume he had placed it. I jotted down the numbers and could not believe what I saw.

“Vydor, do you plan to let me in on your discovery?” he asked.

“Well, I am not sure I believe this. But I remember the two pieces of data that I was able to get out of the code before getting hauled away, a phrase and some numbers. The phrase was ‘The Black Adders have hatched’ and the numbers ... are the stellar coordinates of the colony we are en route to.” I just let that last statement hang in the air for a bit.

He sighed and after a pause said, “I was afraid of this.”

“Afraid of what?” I asked.

“Well, in your file are orders that if you ever hit a memory block I am to inject you with 35ccs of Crystalline Betazene before you succeed in breaking it. Apparently they did not trust their blocks to hold against you, and it seems with good reason.”

“Forgive me if I am off-base here, Doc, but 35ccs seems far too high,” I said.

“Indeed, it would be for a normal person under normal conditions. You were not under normal conditions. You were fighting extreme pain, and the normal dose would have only stabilized you. Their goal was to push you into a coma to prevent you from discovering whatever it was they had blocked. My orders were to keep you in the coma until someone could come and reestablish the block.” He then stood, picked up the hypodermic syringe from his desk and tossed it into my lap. When I picked it up I saw it was completely full.

I leveled my gaze at him and said, “This is full, Doctor.”

“Yes, instead my official report will say that your medical alert patch malfunctioned, and that we need to order a replacement. I will also record that you passed out due to overexertion, and lack of rest. Your official treatment will be rest and a good meal, and to leave your medical alert patch off until we can replace it,” was his answer.

“Why, Doc?” I asked. “You are not the type to disobey an order and get involved in a cover-up.”

“Vydor, you will learn in time that you have to weigh each order you get against the situation at hand. In most cases orders come down the chain of command, and often from people far removed from the situation. Sometimes, as in this case, the orders were placed long before the situation came about and need to be adjusted in light of new information and events that arose since the order was given. Beyond that, though, you need to use your own moral compass to judge whether an order is something you should follow or not. In this case, it was that moral compass that told me this order is wrong. If I am questioned officially I can simply state I took the Emperor’s orders for your upcoming mission to overrule that order since if you were placed in a coma there would be no way for you to fly. The rest of the cover-up is actually described in the orders so I would not have to explain that away.”

Well, this doctor was packed full of surprises. Technically I should have reported him for disobeying orders but, as he pointed out, that would jeopardize the mission as well as getting my memory blocked again. He had me here. I could not report him, and part of me felt that was good.

“Doc, I have to ask you something. Why did you recommend me so highly to the captain? I did not think you would have known anything about me.”

He got that faraway look about him again, just as he had in the meeting. This time I could watch him more closely and I saw that there was more to it than that. He seemed to be fighting some internal struggle with himself, one I could barely detect. After a few minutes he sighed and looked at me.

“Vydor, I know that I did, but I cannot remember doing it. You see, like you I have many memory blocks, but unlike you I have never been able to open them. I can find them, just not open them,” he stated in an almost depressed tone.

“But no alarms went off showing you in pain?” I asked.

He had a proud smile about him as he started his reply, “No, I have been fighting the memory blocks much longer than you have. You will find after you defeat the pain a few times it starts becoming second nature and you get to the point that you don’t even notice it any more. It took all my medical training the first few times to get through it, but I did. Of course the real question you must be wondering about is why I have memory blocks, and that’s a question I have been researching ever since returning to my post here.”

“Returning to your post? As far as I know you have not left the ship since taking over from Dr. Smith.” This visit was providing all kinds of new threads to work out, and it seemed that they must be connected to the Magi. Why that should be was a mystery, but my instincts told me it was true.

“The problem is that you think Dr. Smith and I are two different people, in fact everyone in this fleet does. However, I know for a fact that we are not. Vydor, if we continue this discussion you probably won’t like where it leads. It will cast a doubt on everything you think you know about the Empire. Are you sure you want to hear it?” He had a concerned look on his face, worried about how I would take all this new knowledge.

“Doctor, information is my game; all I deal in is facts, figures and numbers. I know everything we have talked about so far will somehow lead me to the solution to the Magi puzzle. I need whatever information you have to give me the best chance of surviving this mission.” I had to keep him talking.

“Very well.” He started to pace a bit as he spoke. “When I came aboard this ship five years ago, I felt I had been here before, but every memory of this ship was blocked. So I started digging in the ship’s logs and personal records. As part of my search I looked at Dr. Smith’s records. At a glance I knew they were faked. In time I was able to reconstruct a series of events, none of which I can directly remember, but I know must be true. Many years ago I was a leading DNA researcher. I accumulated

many awards for my work on trying to unravel the DNA code. I even helped to create a lot of the DNA simulation software that is being used to test genetic treatments today...”

“Sorry to interrupt, but what do you mean the ‘mystery of DNA?’ When I was in the Academy we studied it. It seemed fairly simple and well-understood to me,” I said.

He looked right at me, locked my gaze and said, “You were lied to.” He let that sit in the air for a minute, and then continued, “DNA is still a complete and total mystery to us. We have no idea where it came from, or how it works. We understand bits and pieces; enough to make medicines and correct some defects, but that is it. If you take the time to do the research I think you will be shocked by the number of things we don’t understand that you were told we did in school. The mind is another; no one really knows how it works. Centuries of study have not solved the puzzle. No matter what we learn about it, we cannot make any theory fully fit. It is as if we are missing some critical piece of that puzzle. But this is beside the point ...” He paused to gather himself, and then continued, “It was all that time spent studying DNA that helped me spot the tampering with Dr. Smith’s records. In fact, the DNA was mine with some not-so-clever editing to make it look like a different person. It happened to be software I had helped to create which was used to fake the DNA, so I was able to undo the changes and get back to the original code, which matches mine perfectly. Since then I have spent a few hours every day trying to unravel why all this has happened. I have managed to rebuild a lot of my old life, but haven’t found any answers yet.”

“Wow, this really creates a lot more questions than answers. To start with, why would the Empire lie about the state of medical research?” I had so many questions, but a cover-up of this magnitude was just unimaginable, and I had to start with that.

“You are expecting some deep, dark reason, with many levels of complexity, but in reality it is deceptively simple. This is where we will really begin to challenge your preconceptions. You, like everyone else, were brought up to worship and serve the Emperor with all your heart, mind and body. As a child you probably sent him small gifts and offerings to help ensure you would have a good path in life to follow. Now, think for a minute. If it became generally known that no one had any solid idea where life came from, or how the most vital parts of our bodies function, would you think that such worship would hold up?”

“What do you mean? We know where we come from, a planet near a G-class star ...” I started. Then I realized that the planet had never been found, nor had I ever heard anything but the most general information on it. It was so ingrained into our society that I had accepted it as true without ever thinking about it.

“I think you are starting to get it. By the look on your face, you don’t like it very much,” he said.

My mind was reeling from the blow to the basic beliefs I had grown up with. What could all this mean? I needed time to collect myself, so I took him down another road. “Doctor, assuming what you say is true, then why did the captain tell me you recommended me to him? I would think that if they wanted that buried they would have blocked his mind too.”

“Ah, now you see the trap that lies and cover-ups create. If they blocked his memory, then later he would not have remembered my recommendation and would not have kept you on his staff. This of course allows the possibility of the captain asking me about it later, but in this case the imperfection of the memory blocks would help them. I think it’s safe to assume that you have more memory blocks you haven’t yet found. In time, you will find you still know things that you acquired during those memories, but you won’t know how you know them. For example, even though they blocked my memory of recommending you to the captain, I know that I did it. So if the captain asked me, they were betting I would just go with it in order to avoid looking like a fool for not remembering.” He sat down behind his desk and leaned back. “The question is, where does this all leave us? Well, from what I can tell, we have a lot more questions than answers, and you are our best hope for getting them. Like you, I know the answer is down there on that planet. I can feel it calling me. If I could think of a way to pull it off, I would be on that mission with you.”

I sat there quietly for a while just thinking about everything I had been told. I had never in my wildest dreams ever expected to have a conversation like this with a respected officer. On one hand, all my training and schooling was screaming at me that he was a traitor and it was my duty to kill him before he could tell more people what he told me, but on the other hand I knew he was right. Something about all of this was calling me, and dragging me to that planet. I could not fight it. I had to follow this through and reach the planet.

He leaned forward in his chair and locked eyes with me and said in a low tone, "Vydor, listen to me very carefully. You must avoid Larath until you launch. If he discovers you broke this memory block, it is his job to put it back."

His tone implied so much more than his words. "That will not be easy. I am scheduled to meet with him at 0600 tomorrow. He promised to teach me a defense against the Magi's fear weapon."

"You're already able to beat that weapon. Just use the same thought shield you use when you drop into puzzle-solving mode, without going into the mode. You will then become completely immune to the Magi's fear weapon and Larath's empathic powers ..."

"Wait a minute, Doctor, I never mentioned a thought shield. How did you know that?" Just how much information was he withholding? As I pondered that he got that look on his face again. When he came out of it I said, "Let me guess, another memory block?" I paused as he nodded, then pushed on. "It seems our pasts are heavily intermingled and someone did everything they could to prevent us from knowing it."

"It would appear so," he said as he turned and entered something in on the computer. "Either way, that thought shield is how you will block all the psychic powers. You are probably wondering why I did not mention that in our briefings. That was because Larath was present at all of them. If he suspects I have made progress on cracking my memory blocks - well, let's just say I would probably have an unexpected retirement party."

"I really do not like casting Larath as an enemy," I stated, but it was worse than that. It seemed like the enemy might be the Empire itself, but that could not be true!

"Nor do I, but really it is much worse than that. If both of us have had our pasts tampered with, what about the rest of the senior staff? It would seem a given that if I retired and came back as a different person they should have recognized me." He paused there, and then said, "One has to wonder how deep this cover-up goes, or should I say, how high?"

"So where do we go from here? Obviously, I have to get to that planet, at any cost. I do not want to believe that this is how the Emperor wants it to be. I would rather believe there is some evil force operating inside the highest levels of command which is orchestrating all this." That was such a cop-out. I could see where all the evidence pointed, but I just could not believe the Emperor would betray his loyal servants like this.

"In any case, we can be assured that whoever is behind this means to stay hidden at any cost. The first thing we need to do is to arrange for you to be ordered off duty, to rest and recover from your ordeal. Then we need you to leave a day early on your mission, in fact at 0500 hours tomorrow would be best," he said.

"Assuming that could be done, that would trip suspicions with my team since they are expecting me to make an announcement at 1800 hours," was my reply.

"Well that is simple; contact your replacement shortly before 0500 hours, saying that the mission was moved up, and that he has to take over as of 0515. It would not be the first time a mission timeline was moved up. No one would be much surprised by that," he stated.

"And how are we going to pull this off? I cannot just leave early; I am still waiting on a squad and ship assignment from Zalith," I pointed out.

"I can handle that. Zalith and I have had a very good relationship ever since I saved his son's life. I will simply tell him that we have reason to believe that the mission has been compromised and that we think the Magi know the mission timeline. That way he will see the wisdom in stepping it up a day so that you arrive long before they expect you. He may suspect he is not getting the whole truth, but he trusts me enough not to ask questions." He turned back to his computer and a smile crept across

his face. "It seems that about ten years ago you had a fainting spell which was attributed to working too hard in school and neglecting your diet. They put you on medical leave for a few days."

I looked over his shoulder and saw the record. I knew that matched the memory I had just unblocked, but until that time I had had no recollection of it. "That settles it, we will go with your plan. And since I will be leaving on a stealth mission, I must conveniently turn in that faulty medical alert patch."

"Yes, and since it is faulty, there is no reason for me to keep it." With that he tossed it in the trash disposal that would quickly recycle it back to raw materials.

"There are many questions still to be asked, but I do not think we would get anywhere tonight. I must get back to my quarters and get some rest; it might be a while before I get another chance," I said. After exchanging well-wishes, I left and returned to my quarters.

As soon as I entered my room, I noticed I had a message waiting from High Command. I went over and played it.

"Commander Vydor, this message is for you only, direct from the officer of the Emperor. You are not cleared to share this with anyone except your strike team. These new orders supersede all previous orders. You are not to attempt to contact the Magi in any way. You will lead your team to steal one of their plasma cannons and any information you can get with about the fear weapon you reported. Once you have that, you are to get off the planet and it is to be destroyed. The captain will be told all he needs to know when the time is right. When you return you will report back all that you learned only to High Command. The Emperor sends his blessings for a successful mission."

Great, orders to not speak with the Magi. How would I get any answers if I did not? This might turn out to be one of those orders Dr. Rannor would tell me should not be obeyed. Well, there would be plenty of time to think about that on the trip to the planet. Now I would have to get some rest.

Chapter Ten

As I woke very early the next morning, the full weight of the mission I was about to undertake hit me anew. This was no longer merely a puzzle to solve but a real mission to run with real lives on the line. It had been easy to ignore the human factor but now that would have to change.

What does one take on a suicide mission? I supposed there was a chance of success, but it did not look promising. There really was not much I needed to bring. All I owned were a few dusty old books that had been passed down through my family for so long that I had no idea where they had come from. I had been told one of them was very important. I couldn't read it; it was in a language that I had never seen in all my years at school.

I remember the day that my father gave it to me. I had just graduated from the Academy at the top of my class, and I received a message that he needed to see me right away. He was suffering from the final stages of Betalian's Syndrome. I went as fast as I could. I knew there was very little time left.

Betalian's Syndrome is one of the few fatal illnesses that we cannot cure. No one really understands what it is, or what causes it. The body just starts to shut down, one organ at a time, until the patient dies. It can take years. Transplants and cyber-orgs only delay the process.

When I arrived at his hospital room, he looked bad, worse than I had ever seen him. I knew that the doctors had no tricks left to try. "Dad, how are you?"

"Not well, son. I can see the end of the line coming. It won't be long now. The doctors tell me my brain is starting to shut down. I hear you graduated with the highest scores ever in the history of the Academy. Congratulations, my son, you make your old man proud. Have you chosen your path yet?"

I had to strain to make out his words, as he could barely talk. I knew better than to try to stop him; he would just waste more energy arguing with me about it. "Yes, Father, I am going into Intelligence."

"Ah, yes, you were always one to play with puzzles. I never found one you could not solve. Look, I know I don't have much time left, and there is much I wanted to teach you yet. In my room, back home, look under my bed. You will find a safe. Inside it is my most valuable belonging. Keep it with you always. I wish I had time to teach you what it is. Just remember one thing, the Emperor is not ... BEEP BEEP BEEP ..."

Suddenly all the alarms were going off. The doctors rushed in, and I was forced out of the room by the orderlies. I spent the rest of the night pacing, waiting for news from the doctors. Someone from the Academy called, wanting to know where I was. I had left the ceremony before the end, without telling anyone. I did not take the call, I just asked the nurse to handle it for me. She was a nice older woman. "Don't worry about it, son, I'll take care of it. You just get some rest, okay?"

Later the headmaster of the Academy came by. "Vydor, you never told me your father was so ill. I had to pull some strings just to find you. I would have let you skip the ceremony to be here instead."

"No, that would have broken his heart. He wanted me to be there so badly. I think it is what kept him going these last few weeks. I am sorry, sir, for leaving without notice."

"Forget it, no one could blame you. How is he?"

"I don't know, sir. He was trying to tell me something, and then the alarms went off, and ..." I could not continue.

"Stay here, son; I will see what I can find out for you."

The headmaster was a gentle man, and he took a personal interest in all his students. He never had any children of his own, and I think the school served as a substitute family for him.

"They are doing everything they can for him. That is all they can say right now," he said and took a seat near where I had been trying to get some rest.

A few hours later the doctor walked out to where we were sitting and said, "I am sorry, we did everything we could, but he didn't make it."

The rest of the night was a haze. All I can remember is that the headmaster took me home and told me that he was giving me some time off before sending me on active duty.

I found the safe Dad told me about. He never gave me the combination to open it, but I was able to guess it after only a few tries. When I opened the safe, all that was inside was a book, a real book, with paper pages. It looked very old. It was not in a writing I had ever seen before.

I brought the book to my language teacher at the Academy. He said that he had seen samples of this writing but could not read it himself. He cautioned me against showing the book to anyone. He said that it could get me into big trouble. He refused to say more.

My father wanted me to keep this book with me always, so I decided I must bring it. The rest of my gear would have to be practical, in case I had to carry it all on my back for a period of time.

Zalith knocked on my door, waking me from my reverie. I assumed the crew assignment was ready.

“Hello, Zalith, come in. I am just checking my gear one more time,” I said.

“Vydor, we don’t have much time, so I will be brief. I am giving you twenty-five of my Dark Knights. They are the best of the best. They have been fully briefed on what is to come. All of them have more experience in the field than you do. I don’t like this mission at all.” He paused and paced for a moment. I decided to wait and see what it was he wanted to say. “I have been in this fleet for longer than you have been alive, and I have made some friends in high places in that time.

“High Command does not expect you to return from this mission. That really angers me. I know that I have been hard on you, even to the point of saying you are under-qualified for your rank, but you are my brother-in-arms here in the field. For this to happen to you is as if it happened to me. I am giving you the best men this navy has ever seen because I want all of you back alive. I am also giving you the Dark Talon. It is the only ship ever to return from a suicide mission with all the crew alive. A word of advice for you: let the Dark Knights lead most of the time. They know what they are doing.”

With that he just walked out of the room. I never thought he cared at all what might happen to me. I seemed to have underestimated him in more ways than one.

Zalith was assigning me the Dark Knights, so I needed a minor gear change. The Dark Knights were an elite group of Zalionian warriors who were extremely dedicated and deadly. Each of them had decades of experience, all of it as a penetration squad. They specialized in the kinds of missions that often put them deep within hostile territory with no support. This created a unique bond between them. Men who have served with them say it is as if they can read each other’s minds.

Their name came from the color of their scales. Each of them had a permanent dye implanted over his entire body. This dye was a very deep, flat black that made them nearly invisible in any dimly-lit situation; it also had a thermal reduction effect that made them just as hard to see with night-vision goggles. They preferred to operate only at night when on planetary surfaces, and this dye gave them a big advantage.

I put away my normal uniform. The Imperial blue would not work well for this mission. Instead I pulled out my own night gear, lightly armored and perfectly black coveralls that would give me similar characteristics to the Dark Knights’ scales. In addition to being the perfect camouflage for night missions, it was also completely silent and had a ton of storage in small hidden pockets. This allowed me to ditch the pack I had been planning to carry. When travelling with a group like the Dark Knights, one needs to be light and fast.

I stopped for one last check in the mirror before I left. I sighed as I caught a glimpse of my tightly-cropped hair. It was one of the minor things I disliked about my job, not being allowed more than half an inch of hair on my head, and absolutely no facial hair. I never really understood this regulation, and that made it harder to follow.

It was a short walk from my quarters to where the Dark Talon was docked. The Dark Knights would be making their last run though their pre-mission checklists. My biggest concern was how they would feel about having me in charge. Of course they were highly loyal, but I was an outsider. Worse

than that, I was an outsider with far less combat experience than any of them. I could not afford to have them second-guessing my orders.

As I entered the hangar, a docking bay worker called out, "Senior officer on deck!" and everyone snapped to attention.

"Crewman, is the bay ready for launch?" I asked the sergeant on duty.

"Yes, sir!" was his reply.

"Then clear the hangar. I want only myself and the Dark Knights in here."

"Yes, sir!" he replied and immediately began shouting orders to clear the bay. While he did that I turned to one of the Dark Knights and said, "Gather up your team for final briefing." Without a word he turned to the rest of them, and they all came out and assembled before me. It really seemed that they could read each others' minds!

They were a very impressive bunch; the shortest of them was a half-meter taller than my one-point-eight-meter frame. Their uniforms were impressive despite how plain they were. On these kinds of mission, no rank, name badge, or insignia of any kind was permitted. If any of us was captured, especially myself, it would be best if the enemy did not know whom they had.

"Computer, security lockdown code Delta-Three, execute!" I called out. That guaranteed us privacy for this conversation. What I was about to say to these men was classified, and I could not risk being overheard. I took a deep breath and began my speech.

"I know that General Zalith has already briefed you on the official line, and told you all that you officially need to know. What I am about to tell you must never be repeated. Indeed, once you board that craft, nothing you say, do, hear, or see will ever be recorded. This mission is classified to such a degree that only High Command has the authority to know what we are up to. Our orders for this mission come directly from the Emperor himself, completely bypassing the normal chain of command. Not even the captain of this ship knows all I am about to say." I could tell they were not comfortable with this; heck, I was not either, but it was not my place to question the Emperor.

"A hostile force, one that we have named the Magi, currently controls the planet we are heading towards. It is unknown what they call themselves so we will refer to them as the Magi until further notice. They are a very powerful group of unknown size.

"Recently a class-three task force was sent to this planet to bring it back under control. This task force was led by Lieutenant Tom." I was surprised to see a look of recognition on some of their faces. Good, that would make the next point all the more powerful. "The Magi defeated the class-three task force before they could get a foothold. As far as we know, there were no survivors."

The Dark Knights were a stoic bunch by nature. If not for my training in intelligence gathering I might have thought they did not react at all to that news, but I could tell they were all shocked. Again, this was good because I needed to keep them just a little off-balance so I might be able to gain a degree of trust from them.

"The Magi have two primary weapons that we know of. Both of them have already been brought to bear against us. The first is a plasma cannon. I will not waste our time with all the technical details; just be aware that it is a weapon much greater in power than anything in the fleet. Indeed, one shot from it could potentially destroy the Dark Talon." The Dark Talon was very heavily armored, and it was hard to imagine anything powerful enough to take it out with a single blow, so that made it a perfect example.

"The second weapon is far more subtle, and in many ways far more deadly. This colony used to house a secret squad called the Black Adders. They were trying to develop a new weapon for our arsenal: psionics. Their progress with this is unknown because we lost communication with the colony over a year ago. We believe the Magi have wiped out the Black Adders, but it is possible that they are one and the same. If they are, it will mean that you might be required to terminate all of them."

I paused a moment while I let them contemplate that. No one liked the idea of turning our weapons on our own people; but if they were the Magi, they drew first blood, and we have no choice but to fight back.

“Now, the logical question is: What is psionics? The honest answer is that we do not know. However, out here even when we were still days away from the system, we began to feel its impact. You must all have sensed it, that scent of fear on the ship and the crew; that gnawing specter of doubt in your minds that you cannot shake off. It is not at all natural for hardened warriors to feel this way, but nonetheless you do. That is the impact of the Magi’s weapon. It is becoming more intense the closer we get to the planet.

“Fear will cause you to hesitate, to doubt your own judgment and senses. Fear will cause you to underestimate yourselves, and overestimate them. You are all battle-hardened warriors. You know how to deal with fear, and this is no different except in its magnitude. You will have to force yourselves to fight it. We do not know how this weapon works, and have no defense for it, so you must steel your minds and deal with it in your own manner. Remember it is not a natural fear; it is far more dangerous and crippling. You were chosen for this mission because General Zalith believes you are the best of the best. I assure you no one less than that will survive this mission.”

I paused to gather myself for the next order. This was not an easy command to give, as it meant complete trust in these men, whom I had never served with before. I looked each one of them over and was impressed again with the power they radiated. These truly were the best the Empire had ever produced.

“The Empire has good reason to be worried about this colony. As of now, they believe the Magi are all on this planet. Two weeks after we launch the captain will destroy the planet, whether we make it off or not. We simply cannot risk them spreading out. This could be our only chance to eliminate them. Why wait two weeks? Well, that is where we come in. Officially we are going to make contact with the Magi and attempt to make them part of the Empire. Obviously that is not the real mission, at least not the orders we will be operating under. Our primary objectives are to learn how they are able to control fear as they do, and to steal one of their plasma cannons. Anyone, alien or not, who gets in our way is to be eliminated. No attempt at communication will be made with them. I must stress that these orders are extremely secret. Only the Emperor and ourselves know of them.” I could tell they were very unhappy with that. They were hard-core military, and to them the chain of command was sacred. To bypass it completely must have left a foul taste on their forked tongues.

Now for the hard part. “As you know, I am in a position which gives me access to extremely sensitive information that could be very dangerous in the hands of a hostile force. If it should happen that I am taken prisoner and you are unable to rescue me, you must kill me, even if you have to give your own lives to do it. We cannot risk even the slimmest chance that they might successfully break me and gain access to what I know.” This brought a look of respect from them.

Now I had to test my shocking little speech to see if it worked. “Men, I know that all of you have more combat experience than I, and I will have to lean heavily on your skills and knowledge. However, I must have your one-hundred-per-cent, unconditional loyalty. We are about to leave to penetrate into extremely deadly territory, and I cannot have anyone questioning my orders at a critical time, even if they seem foolish. If you cannot give me this loyalty, I will release you from your duty to this mission. I will fly it alone if I must. I will not allow any negative marks on your records should you decide not to come, but by accepting this mission you are giving your word to follow me, into certain death if need be. I intend to complete our primary objective, regardless of the personal cost, and I will accept nothing less from you. If you are leaving, this is your only chance. We will be under total communications blackout until we return.”

Here I stopped. I knew none of them would be willing to back down from such a challenge. They were warriors, and honor was their life. To back down after such a speech would imply fear and weakness. It was a bit of a gamble maneuvering them like this, but I needed them completely on my side or this really would be a suicide mission.

The squad’s sergeant came forward. Surprisingly, at just over two meters tall he was the smallest of them, though not by much. He locked his steel-grey eyes on mine. I matched his fierce gaze and said, “Speak freely, Sergeant.”

He said, "Sir, the Dark Knights were hesitant about this mission when we were first briefed. We did not like the idea of following a green leader to try and negotiate with the Magi. Now that the mission parameters have changed to include wiping out the Magi, we no longer have those hesitations. You need not worry about us; if by death or life we can serve you, we will." With that he stepped back into place with the rest of the Knights.

"Thank you." I was very pleased by that response. It was better than the begrudging reaction I had expected. "Then, men, complete your preflight. We leave the instant you're ready. Operation Quiet Storm is now officially underway."

"Yes, sir!" was their reply, in perfect unison, and they immediately went to work. I took what little gear I had, stowed it on board and did my best to stay out of the way.

Chapter Eleven

The Dark Talon was a Kessler-class vessel, often referred to as a mini-battleship. It had an impressive array of weapons and tactical sensors. It was specifically made for this kind of solo penetration mission. The bridge crew was made up of a mission leader, pilot, tactical officer, and gunner. Each position overlapped the others so that there were at least two crewmen able to handle any given function at any given time. Their stations were fanned out in a half-circle with the mission leader's position in the center. This allowed the mission leader to keep on top of what was going on and communicate freely with his crew. Once I had boarded, I took my seat in the mission leader's chair and asked, "Is all ready for departure?"

"Yes, sir," was the pilot's reply.

"Computer, execute program Vydor Final Departure, authorization code Victor - Igloo - Nancy - Charlie - Eggplant - Nancy - Tango. Pilot, as soon as the way is clear, launch the ship. There will be no clearance to launch from the command, since we do not officially exist. At first possible instant, engage full stealth and take us out of the gravity wake of the fleet."

"Yes, sir," came the reply.

The planet was still almost three days away, but the Dark Talon was equipped with the newest generation of microjump drives and could dramatically reduce that distance. Indeed, we would be in orbit in about an hour.

There was a slight lurch as the craft was released from its moorings, and ahead on the viewing screens I could see the bay doors opening and a rush of air escaping the bay as the energy screens dropped. The pilot gracefully accelerated us out of the bay and into open space. As we cleared the doors all the computer displays dimmed as the ship slipped into the low-power mode associated with complete stealth.

"We have cleared the bay doors, accelerating to the tidal exit point now," reported the pilot.

"As soon as you can, make the jump. Target the jump's exit so that we come out in the moon's gravitational shadow," I ordered.

"Yes, sir, path already laid out. We should be able to jump in twenty minutes," replied the navigator.

I wanted to get to the planet as soon as possible to give us the greatest amount of time to complete our mission and get out of there before the planet was destroyed. This, of course, made the next twenty minutes feel like an eternity. Finally the pilot called out, "Jumping in three, two, one ..."

Jumping inside a star system was a tricky business, and something only a smaller ship like ours could pull off. A larger craft like the Dragon Claw, or most of her fleet could only jump in interstellar space, and even then they needed to be at least a couple of weeks away from any major gravity well at both the entrance and exit points.

Long ago it was discovered that the speed limit of the universe was equal to the speed of light. There was no way to break it, but it needed to be broken or interstellar travel would be impossible. This brought on the invention of the jump drive. It was a very strange technology that I did not fully understand, and I am not sure anyone does. It grew out of the discovery that gravity could bend time. It seems that everything that we know of is affected by gravity, nothing is immune. The jump drives take advantage of this by using a gravitational bubble to force the ship out of time while still moving through space. Since the ship stays stationary with respect to time, but moves in space, it effectively bypasses the speed-of-light limit. To say the ship moves through space is not quite true because it is a half step out of sync with reality while jumping. This technology allowed us to take the most direct route to our destination without worrying about small things in our path. Big items which create large gravity wells are a real problem and need to be avoided. This is why we needed to get out of the gravity wake of the fleet, as any large gravity well we passed would pull us back into time, and would place us directly in the center of mass for that well. In most cases this would be catastrophic for all involved.

The jump drives make interstellar travel possible, but it still takes a very long time to travel. The distance each ship can jump is limited by the size of the gravity bubble it can create, which is a function of the amount of energy the ship can generate and the size of the ship's own gravity well. Fleets of ships can combine their gravity wells and link their drives for extremely long jumps, but on the scale of the galaxy it still takes many jumps, with significant time to recharge the drives between each jump. A naval fleet is not expected back to her homeport for several years at a time.

While traveling in jump space time has no meaning. This has as-yet unexplained effects on matter. All physical matter is frozen and unable to be affected by anything. For example, if there was a pot of boiling water at the beginning of the jump, during the jump it looks like it was flash-frozen with all the steam and bubbles trapped in their exact relative positions until the end of the jump when it returns to boiling as if nothing had happened. That is not the really odd part; what is strange is that sentient beings, even though their bodies are unable to move, have a complete awareness of their surroundings. It is almost as if something about life is not part of the physical world.

Whenever I jumped, I looked back over my shoulder and my constant companion was always there: a tall, dark figure with a sickle, dressed in long, black flowing robes and with a skull for a face, sunk deep in a black hood. He always stood there patiently waiting for me, as if to say, "In time, you will be mine."

This time was different; there was another being with us, one I had never seen before. This was a being of pure light. He differed completely from the dark figure in every way. This new being held his arms open wide as if to say, "Come to me." As I studied him, he and the dark figure faded away and time slowly took hold of us again.

"We are clear of the jump, all systems show green," came the call from the navigator. How did they recover so fast? I was still working my way back into reality. As I regained all my senses I saw the Dark Knights already at work making sure all was as it should be around the ship. Exiting this close to a major gravity well was very dangerous. Parts of the ship could have been pulled into it. "All Clear!" came a call from behind me. Good.

"How do you recover so fast from a jump?" I asked as I finally regained control of all my senses.

"Sir, you are the only other pilot on this mission. Should something happen to me, you will have to take over. I ask you not to share this with anyone, but you should know in case we have to fight our way out. The secret is meditation, sir. That's why I do the countdown. I set the computer to make the jump for us, and we all slip into a meditative state just before the jump. When the jump is finished we have no ill effects," answered the pilot.

Amazingly, they had just let me in on one of their most closely-guarded secrets. They had often used their extremely fast recovery as a major advantage in combat, jumping right in the middle of a fight and coming out with guns blazing. It was an extremely effective tactic that many tried to mimic, but without the nearly instant jump recovery of the Dark Knights, no one could pull it off.

"Thank you, I will keep that secret safe. I am honored you have shared it with me," was the only reply I could give. I was sure I would never forget this moment. I had no more time to think about it, as suddenly the ship's alarms went off.

"Five incoming fighters," came the call from tactical.

I felt a wave of fear pass over the ship. I knew it could not be from the five enemy fighters. We could take them, but nonetheless everyone was very much afraid. Suddenly the honor guard, and others I had seen who were seemingly immune to the fear weapon, came to my mind. Larath's comment finally made sense. "FOCUS! That's the key!" I called out. "The Magi have found us! Dark Knights, listen to me very carefully, FOCUS on my words! The Magi have brought their deadly fear weapon against us; you must not let it overcome you. You can beat it. Everyone who is not needed for the dogfight, go into your meditative trance; it should protect you from the weapon. The rest of you, FOCUS! Focus is the key defense. You must focus everything on your job and push out all other thoughts. You can beat this weapon. You are the Dark Knights, the best of the best of the best!"

I looked around and most of the crew was buckled in and looking almost asleep, but each of the three bridge officers was hard at work at his station. "Tactical, report," I ordered.

"Five Peregrine class fighters, sir. They know we are here but cannot target us. I suspect they will soon begin firing at random to draw us out," was his report.

"Where did they come from?" I asked. "The colony did not have any shuttles, never mind any combat vessels." Peregrine class fighters were light attack ships. They were designed to be extremely fast, nimble and work in small groups. Their primary attack plan is to fly in unpredictable patterns around their target, making themselves as hard to hit as possible while continuously firing on their own target.

"Best guess would be a moon base, sir, but I see no sign of one," was his answer as the fighters began to randomly fire in our general direction.

"As soon as you get a solid lock on one of them, break stealth and take them out," I ordered.

They brought the Dark Talon around and moved towards one of the fighters while still hidden. Once they closed the distance, I felt the Dark Talon roar out of its low-power mode and the swishing sound of two antimatter missiles launching. Immediately after firing those, they banked the ship hard and fired the ship's forward high-energy particle cannons on a second ship, quickly destroying both craft, probably before they had even noticed our attack. The three remaining fighters came at us from three different directions at once, all guns blazing. The pilot throttled up the Dark Talon's engine to full thrust and turned away from their attack. The Peregrines quickly closed the gap and came up behind us, which was exactly what the Dark Knights wanted them to do. Immediately I was slammed forward in my harness as the ship's rear engines were cut off, and the forward braking thrusters were fired at maximum power. All three fighters flew past us, and right into a spread of weapon fire that the Dark Knights had laid out. One fighter was quickly destroyed, a second damaged but the third escaped unharmed.

The Dark Talon's primary engines were brought back up to speed and they quickly moved to take out the wounded Peregrine. They were able to down that one quickly, and moved to engage the last fighter. Before they could, the tactical officer called out, "Fifteen more Peregrines just appeared at 270 degrees, in a tight bravo formation."

A bravo formation? That meant they had just jumped in and would still be recovering! Apparently the Knights realized this too as they broke off their attack and headed towards the new group of fighters, launching a large spread of antimatter missiles and all forward weapons firing. Eight of the enemy fighters were destroyed before they could take any evasive action, but that left us with eight more to fight.

"This makes no sense! Where are they coming from?" I asked.

"Sir! Five Falcon-class ships just came out from behind the moon!" called out the tactical officer.

This was bad. We could take the Peregrines, but we would be completely out-gunned by the five Falcons. Undaunted, the Knights moved to engage the Falcons when the tactical officer called out, "Sir, a Condor class destroyer has just jumped in!"

"How is that even possible this close to the planet?!" I exclaimed. "We need to get out of here. Disengage the enemy and come about to Z minus 90 degrees, maximum thrust, full weapons spread to the rear."

"Yes, sir!" called out the pilot as he executed my order.

"Navigator, prepare the jump drive. Charge it to 18.473% and target the far side of the moon; prepare to execute on my mark. Pilot, I am counting on your ability to come out of the jump with all your senses. As soon as we clear the jump you will need to take control of the ship and keep us from crashing. At the first instant that you can, re-engage full stealth mode." I carefully watched the ship's tactical displays. This course we were on must have looked like a suicide dive right into the planet. Only the Peregrines were keeping up with us. My timing had to be exact on this. "Execute in four ... three ... two ... NOW!"

When I finally came out of the post-jump confusion, I noticed that we were safely on the far side of the planet in a stable orbit. “Excellent work, pilot.”

“Sir, if I may ask, how did you know that we would be thrown over here? There is no way you could have tried this before,” said the tactical officer.

He was right. The move was impossible without the Dark Knights’ ability to operate immediately after a jump. “I stumbled upon it in a video game that allowed me to use your post-jump recovery skill. Later I tested it in countless computer simulations and it worked every time, but this was the first time I was able to try it in a real situation.”

After that I began to look over the battle logs for some indication of where all those ships had come from, but something was wrong with the logs. “Tactical, can you check the logs? My screen does not show any enemy craft at all.”

“Sir, there must be something wrong with the computer. My logs show the same,” he replied as he frantically worked at his station, trying to find the problem.

“Okay, wake up your crewmates ...” I started.

“Sir! Fifty Peregrine-class ships are coming into range!” called out tactical as I felt the fear weapon hit us.

“Do not break stealth, do not engage.” This made no sense at all. I just could not believe there were this many fighters here. Just as I finished that thought the fighters disappeared from my screen. “Of course!” I called out, “Dark Knights, we know the Magi can sow fear, so why not hallucinations, too? Those fighters are not real; once you realize that they will disappear. That is why we have no record of fighting them, because the computers are not subject to the hallucination. Pilot, bring us to the landing site of Lieutenant Tom’s squad. If there is anything left of their ship I want to read its logs.” At first the Dark Knights seemed uncomfortable with that order, but one by one they seemed to get it. “Once you have beaten the hallucination, wake up your crewmates and train them to fight the fear weapon and the hallucinations.”

Chapter Twelve

While we traveled to the landing site, I studied the most recent maps we had of the colony. Clearly the Magi knew we were there, and that meant we would have a fight waiting for us. One could only guess what other tricks they had up their sleeves.

“Sir, his ship is coming into view now,” said the pilot.

“Odd, there is no sign of a fight of any kind,” I remarked. The shelters were up just like Zalith had expected but the entire site was in perfect condition. “Unless ... of course! That explains how they were defeated. They did not know about the fear weapon when they landed, nor the hallucinations. Land us as close as you can. As soon as we are down we will move to take Tom’s camp. For now, assume the Magi hold it even though we can detect nothing. Pilot, I want you to set the Dark Talon to return to orbit under full stealth once we are off. Program the autopilot to return to the fleet in twelve days. Bring a transmitter with us when we leave the ship. I want every bit of information we collect to get back to the fleet should we fail to return. That hallucination weapon is far more deadly than the fear weapon. I shudder to think of the bloodbath if they merely confuse our fleet into attacking itself!”

I let that somber thought sit in the air as we began our final descent. The Dark Knights were rechecking all their weapons and gear. They carried a wide variety of light and heavy arms. I followed their example and rechecked my pulse rifle. It was a fairly slow-firing weapon, but with extreme range and accuracy. It was not the best choice for this kind of raid, but it was my best weapon. At the Academy, I actually earned the name "One-Shot" with it because I was the only ensign who could hit most targets with a single shot.

The Dark Knights all put on their environmental suits in preparation for the landing. The planet had little to no atmosphere and we would be dead without protection. With the addition of a helmet my body armor would work well as an environmental suit on the surface of this barren world. Once everyone was geared up, they depressurized the craft. This would eliminate the need to cycle the airlock, which would be dangerous if we met resistance at the landing site.

Within seconds of the Dark Talon touching down the airlock was opened and we rushed out to secure the area. Once we were all out the pilot used his wrist computer to order the Dark Talon back into orbit and we ran to Tom’s ship. The Knights formed a wedge and put me in the center as they ran. I realized they were intentionally running slower so I could keep up. Their longer, more powerful legs and stabilizing tails allowed them to get much closer to the ground and move much faster than any human. The squad’s sergeant was in the front of the wedge running at his full height, attempting to shield me.

We reached the site without any interference. Nothing living showed on our scanners, and there were no bodies at all. The place looked more like a brand-new training mock-up than the site of a recent battle. The lack of weather helped to keep everything exactly the way it had been set up. As soon as the Knights secured the camp, three of them went into the ship to get the logs that I had requested.

“I do not like this at all,” said the sergeant.

“Me neither, it feels like a trap,” I said.

He nodded to this, but before we could continue one of the men called out, “Sir, single target on the ridge!”

I looked where he was pointing and saw what looked like an older man with a walking staff. I was just about to send someone to retrieve him for questioning when he pointed the staff at us. “What is he ...?” I started to ask when a bolt of energy left the staff and hit a group of the shelters nearby, completely destroying them. The shockwave from the blast knocked me over. The Knights’ powerful tails managed to keep them steady. “Return fire!” I called out.

As I got back up to bring my weapon to bear, I saw that our fire seemed to bounce off him. I grabbed a scanner and detected an energy field around him that I had never seen before. Before I could think this over, he aimed his weapon at the ship. “EVACUTE THE VESSEL NOW!” I ordered over

the inter-suit communications. I saw the three Knights dive out of the ship as the old man's weapon blew a large hole right through it. "He has some kind of personal force field. All of you, concentrate your fire on a single point."

As the Knights adjusted their fire he seemed to realize he was in trouble and dove for cover behind a rock. The Knights did not let up their fire and completely destroyed that rock, but he was nowhere to be found. I moved to the hole in the ship and stuck my hand in it just to make sure it was real. "So much for them only having light arms. Where did he go?" I asked.

"There!" someone called out, and almost as one all the Knights turned and opened fire. He then dove for cover again, and disappeared like the previous time. This happened several more times; we were locked in a stalemate. "Sergeant, we are sitting ducks here while he waits for help. We need to move. I think we should make a run for the colony. He will not be able to fire such a powerful weapon inside without killing himself in the process."

"I agree," he said, and again acting as one they moved into their wedge around me and began running for the airlock on the colony. This time everyone on the outside was continuously firing in all directions. Over my shoulder I saw the old man come out of hiding and take aim with his staff, but he could not fire. If he missed he might rupture the airlock to the colony. I lost track of him as we ran, but I was sure the Knights knew exactly where he was. When we got to the airlock one of them quickly disassembled the lock, and with what looked like a simple twist of a few wires opened the door. The airlock was large enough to hold all of us and we quickly filed in. The Knights up front dropped to one knee and pointed all their guns at the exit to the airlock. As the door opened a group of men rushed in, only to be quickly killed by fire from the Knights' weapons. Once the area was secure I moved forward to check the bodies.

There were no uniforms on them, and I did not recognize their race. They looked almost like humanoid pigs with green skin. They did not have any guns; instead their weapons were what looked like knives and swords of various makes. Looking closely at the weapons, I noticed an oil-like sheen on them. "Poison," I muttered. To my surprise the Dark Knights were stowing their guns and environmental suits, and pulling out their own blades. The sergeant must have noticed my expression.

"In these close quarters blades are superior weapons. If we did not already have our guns at the ready when they rushed in, they would have killed several of us before we could have taken them out," he said.

"Surely our body armor would stop a knife?" I questioned.

He did not answer; instead he picked up one of the alien swords and swung it at the airlock wall. It buried itself deep into the heavy metal wall. "Okay, point taken. Well, all chance for a stealth hit is gone, so I say we push straight for their primary computer center and upload all the data to the Dark Talon to be relayed back to the fleet."

"I agree. If we take this corridor down to the tenth junction, then turn left that will put us on a direct path to our target. Speed is going to be our best defense right now," responded the sergeant.

"Then take us. I will follow your lead," I replied. This was completely his turf. I knew nothing about penetration hits like this.

He then looked at the squad, and they immediately reorganized and we headed out. Four Knights were sent ahead, and four trailed behind us to prevent any surprise attacks on our main force. We were moving fairly quickly down the winding corridor when we got a radio call from our vanguard.

"Sir, we have met resistance ... looks like two humans with smaller versions of that weapon we saw earlier. They are positioned to shoot anyone that comes around the bend," was the report over the radio.

"Hold there. We can assume they have the same personal shields, so wait on additional firepower," replied the sergeant. The Knights all put away their blades and drew out their rapid-fire phase pistols. The sergeant must have seen the look I gave him because he turned to me and said, "The secret of a victorious warrior is being able to adapt to an ever-changing battlefield. We carry several different kinds of weapon so that we are always ready."

When we reached the vanguard I noticed they had set up a movable shield wall and had it ready to slide out. This would give them something to shoot behind. With the sergeant's nod they pushed it out and stayed low behind it. Several bolts of energy flew over the wall and scorched the metal walls behind the Knights. Once out in the corridor they returned fire but the humans had the advantage of not having to hide and were able to keep the Knights effectively pinned down. I remembered something from the map that I had studied, and saw a small access panel. "Sergeant, what is your next move?" I asked.

"Well, we need to break the stalemate," he said and held up two photon grenades.

"Hold off on that. I want to get my hands on those weapons, if possible. Wait here. I am about to do something really stupid, and I do not want to be talked out of it," I said as I removed the access panel and crawled through to another corridor.

I needed to move fast, but undetected. This would be hard since I still was unsure how they had found us under complete stealth in orbit. Then I remembered what had happened in the medical wing, how I dropped completely off all the sensors. The computers, of course, thought the lack of a heartbeat or brainwaves meant that I was dead, but in reality I was merely invisible to the systems. What was it that I was doing ... ? Ah, yes! Of course! The thought shield I used in puzzle-solving mode. I immediately put it up and ran down the corridor.

I came out around the bend just slightly behind the enemy. I activated my suit communicator and said, "Knights, for the next fifteen seconds blast every gun you have. It does not matter whether you hit anything; just create a blanket of light. At fifteen seconds hold all fire and prepare to assist me. Start your fire ... now."

Right on cue the corridor lit up with blinding light. I was shielded around the bend with my back turned and eyes closed, covered with my hand. Silently I counted off the fifteen seconds, and as soon as it was time I turned around the bend at full speed and charged the two humans from behind. They were still blinded from the light and never saw me spring into the air until I hit them both hard. They both went flying down to the floor. I landed in a roll and prepared to get up when I saw that one of them was already on his way up, so instead I pivoted my body on my shoulder and swept his legs out from under him. He fell back and hit the floor again but his partner was on his feet and moving to aim his weapon at me. I sprung off the floor leading with both of my fists, hitting him hard in the center of his chest, throwing him back into the wall and knocking all his breath out of him. I turned to see what the first human was doing, just in time to see one of the Knights pick him up and slam him into the wall.

"Well done, sir. Seems that the reports about you being a timid book worm were unfounded," said the sergeant.

As they restrained the two humans I picked up their weapons from the ground. They looked like bone wands with azure writing on them. It was like something out of a video game. I turned to one of the men and said, "Now you are going to talk, or you are going to wish you did."

He laughed, and wriggled free enough to put his hand on the other man and said something under his breath that I could not make out, and then vanished.

"What happened? Where did they go?" I asked.

"There, sir!" said one of the Knights as he pointed down the corridor.

How did they get down there? Before I could verbalize anything the man who had laughed raised another wand and said, "Fools! We are the Magi! You are pathetic, trapped in your machine-controlled world. Your pitiful empire has reached the end of its wasted life. Now die!" With that he pointed the wand at us and called out in a loud, clear voice, "Rawrathania!"

Around me the Knights dove for cover, but I did not join them. Acting purely on instinct I raised my own wand and repeated his call a mere instant after his. A bolt of energy left my wand and collided with the energy from his wand with a loud explosion. Both bolts were completely consumed by the explosion. "I don't think so!" I called out.

"Impossible!" was his yelled reply.

Then two more humans came running down the corridor behind him, only to be met by a volley of fire from the Knights. Two of them were killed quickly and the other two vanished.

“Good, it appears their shields only work when they are stationary,” said the sergeant. He then waved the vanguard to move out, and turned to me and asked, “How did you know that their shields would not stop your attack?”

“It was a lucky guess. We have limited energy shields like these in labs back in the Academy. None of them stops physical matter, so I assumed these would be the same,” was my response. The truth was I had not thought it through but reacted instinctively. With that, we moved on. I maintained my thought shield; I planned to keep it up at all times now. It would just take some practice.

We did not get very far down the corridor when our vanguard again reported that they were under attack, this time by overwhelming firepower. They were wiped out before we could reach them. As we got close the Knights again deployed their mobile shield wall. As we rounded the corner behind it we saw six humans with wands, all firing very rapidly. The Dragon Knights returned fire and used the shield walls to slowly inch forward. We now knew the way to beat them was to close the distance between us and them, and the Knights would not be deterred. The humans were in a bad situation because if they stood to retreat their shields would fall and they would be gunned down, but if they stayed put we would eventually reach them and make the fight hand-to-hand. No human stood a chance against this squad in hand-to-hand combat. I thought we had a sure win here when we got a call from our rear guard. “More of those green humanoids are coming fast down the corridor, at least fifty of them in view and more coming.”

“Rear guard, abandon your position and return to the main group,” was the order from the sergeant.

About half of the Dark Knights turned and kneeled, preparing to open fire on the first sight of the rear attackers. The rear guard quickly reached us and dropped to do the same. As the green creatures came around the bend the Knights opened fire, but the enemy was holding some kind of shield in front of them and they charged forward, undaunted by the heavy fire. I pointed the wand weapon and fired it into their line. The bolt of energy smashed right through their shields and opened a hole in their defenses, which the Knights immediately took advantage of. This did not even slow their charge; they just kept coming. They soon reached us and the Knights drew their own blades and took them on hand-to-hand.

I moved to the front line of our defenses and added my wand to our firepower, knowing that I could not compete in the rear line. The humans down the corridor did not let up their fire and seemed not to care at all if their weapons hit their own men behind us. I do not know how long we fought there but it was not long before I realized we were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned. Knights were dying on both sides of me, and more humans had arrived to assist the wand group in front of us. I was really hoping the sergeant had some trick up his sleeves to get us out of this. We managed to kill what seemed like hundreds of the green humanoids, but they just kept coming. I was about to grab some grenades off a dead Knight’s body when someone grabbed me from behind and dragged me into a dark room. They put a cloth over my face and as I passed out I saw a very large explosion hit the center of the Knights. The last thing I heard was, “Sorry to do this, sir, but we have to get out of here ...”

Chapter Thirteen

When I awoke I was lying on a hard, cold floor. It took a few moments to work my way out of the stupor left over from whatever they used to knock me out. Even after I recovered I did not open my eyes right away. I did not want to give any indication I was awake just yet, but I did put up my thought shield. If I got a chance to make a break for it I did not want to be tracked. Then I heard a gruff human voice say, "Sir, you can get up. There's no use in pretending you're asleep. You just dropped off our sensors."

I decided to cooperate for now and see what I could learn, so I sat up and looked around. I was not at all prepared for what I saw: four men and two women in Imperial uniforms. Granted, their uniforms looked like they had taken a lot of abuse, but they were still recognizable. Then I noticed the patch on their sleeves. "So I finally meet the Black Adders," I said.

"Yes, sir. I am Major Jerran, ranking officer of what is left of the Black Adders," said a tall and burly-looking man. "Sir, we have to move. The Magi will notice that you've dropped off their sensors and move in on this location as fast as they can to get us. We can fill you in when we get to a safer place."

"Lead on, Major," I said. I was not sure I wanted to trust them yet. After all, one of the most viable working theories cast them as traitors. However, they had left me with all my weapons and gear, so they apparently trusted me, and this trust I could use to my advantage. We traveled very quickly through a maze of corridors that I did not recognize from the map I had studied. After a while the hard metal walls turned into rock, and all lighting ceased. I stopped to slip on my night vision goggles, as did the Black Adders, and we pushed on. Eventually we reached a wall of darkness so deep and dark that even with my goggles on the highest setting I could not see through it. To my surprise they slipped off their goggles and walked through, so I followed suit. After a few steps I walked into a well-lit room. Once my eyes adjusted I looked around at what was apparently a makeshift headquarters. Weapons and supplies were stashed away everywhere, and in the center of the far wall was a set of screens that appeared to be linked into the colony's sensor grid and security network.

"Welcome to our home, sir. We are about a kilometer below the colony, and as long as you keep your thought shield up we are completely undetectable to the Magi," said Major Jerran. "Yes, we know about your shield. In fact, all of us here can do something similar. It comes with being a Black Adder, sir."

"Okay, we are safe then. What in the Emperor's name is going on here and where are the rest of my men?" I asked.

"Sir, I am sorry. Your squad was destroyed. They fought very valiantly, but we got there too late to help and they were hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered," was his reply.

A wave of depression and shock hit me then. I had never lost anyone under my command before. To lose twenty-five all at once was just unthinkable. Depression slowly turned into a cold, burning anger that demanded revenge. "Jerran, you had better start at the beginning and tell me how we went from a loyal, peaceful colony to all-out war in its corridors," I said through gritted teeth.

"Well, sir, I came here about four years ago straight from the Academy to take over the squad. The previous commander had disappeared and was presumed dead, though we had no idea what had happened to him. As you presumably know, the Black Adders were sent here to study psionic powers. Every member of the squad was a master of one or more of these powers. Our primary objective was to develop a means of defense against them. I was chosen to come here as leader because I am a master telekinetic, which is a very rare, almost completely unknown power. They believed this power would give me the fresh insight needed to break a long string of failures.

"When I arrived everything was fairly normal. The squad was continuing with their work, and there was no unrest amongst the civilian families that had come with them. But there was something odd. There were seven old men who kept turning up in highly secure places and I could find no record of them in our database. Whenever I would try to approach one to question him, he would just vanish. I

was not at all happy with this, so I gathered thirteen of our best telepaths to search for these men. Individually, each of them failed, so I formed them into a telepathic lens ...” he said.

“A what?” I interrupted.

“A telepathic lens. It is when a group of telepaths link their minds as if one and pool their powers and skills. It makes them far greater than any single telepath could ever hope to be,” he answered, and then he continued with his story, “That worked very well. Apparently when we chose to do this, the men in question were in a meeting discussing their plans. I didn’t get very much information, just a clear sense that they plan to destroy the Empire.

“Shortly after that connection was made, one of them appeared in the room with us, floating over the table. He called out, ‘Fools! You have no idea who you are playing with!’ and then used a wand to kill the telepaths. Because they were linked up, as soon as one died, they all died. He then turned his wand on me, but I used my telekinesis to grab a chair and hit him from behind with it before he could attack me. He crumbled and fell out of the air, but before I could do anything else two more of them appeared. I ran from the room under heavy fire from their wands. I ran to get help from the colony security force but found them already locked in combat with an army of green-skinned aliens.

“The battle for control of the colony lasted only a few days. Our security forces were just no match for them. Most of the Black Adders fared better as we used our powers to hold some secure ground, but it was not long before we were forced into a full retreat. We decided to make a stand at the central computer core and try to get a message out for help. That decision cost us dearly. We got the message out, but only the six of us survived. We then went deep underground and built this headquarters. Our plan was fairly simple at this point. Survive until help could come.

“When Lieutenant Tom’s forces arrived we planned to join up with them and give them all the info we had, but they never made it to the colony. As soon as they landed and began to move out, several of the enemy came out of hiding and slaughtered them. The firepower they wielded was incredible; nothing could stand in their path.

“They must have had a telepath among their number because as soon as the squad was wiped out they used Lieutenant Tom’s personal communicator and security codes to send a distress call. Once they got the message out, they set up the light shelters at the landing site. We didn’t know at the time why they did all this, but it is now obvious it was to lead you here.

“When your team landed we were sure you would be killed just as Lieutenant Tom’s force was, but not only did you survive the opening attack, you made it into the colony. We knew if we could not get to your team you would not last long against the sheer numbers here. Our plan was to convince you to retreat, but by the time we made it to your squad, you were the only one we could save. Seconds after we pulled you out, they turned their big weapons on your squad, killing all of them, and most of their Greenskins too.”

“Why do you think they wanted to lure me here?” I asked.

“Well, not you personally, but your fleet. As I recall, you were recently assigned to the Dragon’s Claw. Made big news out here because of how young you are. Well, the stated goal of our enemy is the destruction of the Empire, so I assume they plan to make their first strike against the Dragon Claw. If successful, it would have a demoralizing effect across the entire Empire. Sir, it is important that we warn them not to come close to the planet. If they come within range, they will be wiped out,” was his reply.

“You think the Magi can destroy the Dragon Claw and her fleet?” I questioned.

“Sir, we have studied them as much as we could while waiting here, and I fear that they can. Our transmitter will not reach the fleet from here, but I assume your ship is still out there somewhere cloaked. We could get a message to it and the ship could relay it to the fleet,” he said.

“Yes, we could. Before we get to that, please call out your names and ranks. I will need them for any report I send,” I said. I was stalling while I decided how to proceed. Getting a message to the fleet was a darn good idea, but also a direct violation of orders. They might very well disregard it as fraudulent. I felt I could trust the Black Adders, and while I did not think I had all the answers yet, I did think what they told me so far was true.

“Certainly, sir. I am Major Jerran, master telekinetic,” he said.

A young woman with a slight build and long, dark hair was next. “Sergeant Kellyn, master healer.”

A short man with bright blue eyes described himself as “Sergeant Darnath, master telepath.”

Next came a stocky man with brown hair who said, “Sergeant Luke, master telepath.”

A brick house of a man was next and said, “Private Gafar, master telepath.”

And finally a brawny woman. “Private Andreyra, master illusionist.”

“Thank you,” I said as I pulled out my recorder and encrypted the conversation for transmission.

“You recorded all that?” Jerran asked.

“I have recorded everything that has happened on this mission since we left the fleet,” I said.

“Do not look so surprised. I am in Intelligence, after all,” I said with a slight grin. “Now, where is your transmitter?”

“This way, sir,” said Kellyn as she walked to the computers on the back wall.

I encrypted all my logs using a key that I had previously arranged with the captain in case I needed to make a mid-mission transmission like this. There really was no decision to make. I had to try to get this information to the fleet. I established a link to the Dark Talon, and set it to record and relay the information to the fleet. “Captain, I know this is a breach of the mission orders, but I have to get you this information. I am sending everything I have learned in the sub-channel and relaying this via the Dark Talon. The mission is a complete failure, and I am now the only survivor from my team. I have established contact with what is left of the Black Adders and I would like their records marked that they have served the Empire well and did not betray its trust as we first feared. Captain, I cannot leave this line open too long for risk of getting caught. Move immediately to the final stage of our mission plan. Do not approach the planet; I repeat, do not approach the planet. Captain, I suggest you execute your plan from maximum range, without delay.”

Jerran looked at me and asked, “They plan to bombard the planet, don’t they?”

“Yes, that was the plan from the beginning. We only had a short window of time to try to regain control of the colony. If that failed, the Emperor ordered that the planet be destroyed,” was my reply.

“Sir, how much time do we have?”

“Well, hard to say for sure. Three or four days at least,” I answered. As the ranking officer they would be looking to me now to lead them. I was not sure I was ready to lead again after losing the Knights. I looked around at them, and it appeared that Kellyn wanted to speak, but dared not break rank to do it. “Speak freely, Sergeant,” I said.

“Sir, we know a way off this planet. Well, more accurately we think we know how the Magi got here, and we might be able to use that to escape the upcoming bombardment,” she said.

“Go on,” I prompted.

She continued, talking fairly rapidly, “Well, sir, originally we could not understand how they got here. I mean, there are over a thousand of the Greenskins and more and more humans kept arriving, yet we have not detected even a single spacecraft landing anywhere on the planet. During the fighting with the Magi, we discovered this tunnel system that we are in now, and it was not on any map. From what we can tell the Magi have been here a long while digging these tunnels. They seem to be searching for something, but we do not know what for, or if they found it. The tunnels go much deeper than we are at present, several kilometers in fact. Well, we never actually measured it but it’s something like that, you can tell because ...”

“Kellyn, you are off track ...” came a gentle reminder from Major Jerran.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I will try to focus. In our exploration of the tunnels we found a room that has a big stone circle standing vertically against one wall. It is a different kind of rock from the rest of the cave wall. While we were trying to figure out what it was, a blue swirling glow appeared in its center and grew to fill the circle. Then Greenskins started marching out of it, like it was a big door. We quickly found cover to prevent our discovery from being known. Since then we have seen the Magi

and their lackeys go back and forth through the circle. I think it is some kind of gate," she said, almost breathlessly.

"Okay, everyone, pack up. In one hour I want to move on that gate. Our primary objective will be to destroy it. Hopefully we can make it through the gate before it's destroyed, but it is more important to trap the Magi here. Based on your stories it sounds like they are amassing their forces here. If so, it is best that they stay for the bombardment," I ordered.

I watched them pack their gear, and none of them took any of the guns or other normal weapons they had stockpiled. Instead they were grabbing what looked like bundles of those wands and stashing them in various places in their uniforms. Major Jerran brought me a package of the wands and said, "Sir, shortly before Lieutenant Tom's raid we intercepted a shipment of these weapons. We do not fully understand how they work but we do know how to use them. Each one has a command word inscribed on its side. As long as that word is glowing, the wand has a charge. We have not yet worked out how to recharge them, nor do we have any idea how many shots are left in a given wand. This bundle of wands all uses the same command word, 'Rathshiran.' To use it, merely point the wand at your target and say the command word. You control the strength of the blast by the intensity of your focus on your target. You can only target what you can see clearly. The wands appear to have a range of one hundred meters," he explained.

Then he handed me a large staff that was about two meters long and appeared to be made from a type of smooth black wood. "We also captured several of these, which we can recharge. They work exactly like the wands, except they are much more powerful. They have the same line-of-sight limitation, but triple the range. Both of these weapons easily penetrate their personal shields."

"What do we know about these shields?" I asked.

"Not much. They appear to be powered by a box they wear at their waist, and only seem to operate when they are standing still. We have not spent much time worrying about them, as they are ineffective against their own weapons," he replied. "But they have another kind of shield that does block these wands. It is a large oval-shaped device that they hold like a knight from a childhood fairytale. We have been unable to capture one of those yet."

I stowed all the wands, being careful to separate the one I had taken earlier, since it used a different command word. "How long is the trip to the gate?" I asked.

"Sir, it will take us most of a day to reach it from here," Major Jerran replied. "It looks like everyone is ready, sir."

"Everyone, come here for a moment," I said and then waited for them to gather. This was not going to be easy. They were not fine-tuned fighting machines like the Dark Knights. This was not a surprise since they were researchers with only the minimal combat training required by the Empire for service. On top of that, they all looked worn out and ready to give up trying.

Instead of the "barking orders" tone that I would have used with the Dark Knights, I decided words of encouragement might be a better idea. "Okay, you all know more about the Magi and these tunnels than I do so I am going to need you to speak freely. I will be depending on your information and experience to get us to the gate, and survive whatever lies beyond it. You have all done extremely well. Not only have you survived deep within enemy territory, but you also have managed to succeed in the mission I was sent here to accomplish. Because of what you have done, we have a chance to strike a blow to the heart of the Magi's forces while getting critical information back to the Empire. Now we can safely assume the course we are about to take is a very dangerous one, so I need you all on your top game. You have outsmarted and outmaneuvered the Magi many times over the past few months while you have been down here. We will do it again." I paused here to let that sink in. "If you would have me, I would be honored if you would think of me as one of your squad instead of just another ranking officer. Now, before we move out we need a plan to destroy the gate when we get there. Do we have any explosives?"

"No, sir, but I know where we can get some," answered Major Jerran.

"Go on," I prompted.

“Well, sir, the Magi are using explosives to create these tunnels, and we recently found out where they are storing them,” he answered.

“Excellent. How far out of our way must we go to get them?” I asked.

“Sir, it will probably take a couple of hours to get there and back. It is in the opposite direction to the gate.” He paused there. I gave a slight nod to prompt him and he continued. “Sir, it is likely to be guarded and if we move on it the guards will call the Seven.”

“I understand, but we have to destroy that gate and trap them here. If we fail, perhaps we will succeed in distracting them long enough to prevent them from escaping. Think of all your families, friends, and classmates out there ...” I gestured at the ceiling and continued, “If we can stop this war here, they have a chance to live. Otherwise, war with this powerful an enemy will reach them, and many of them will be called to battle. You have already seen the power of the Magi; we cannot let the Empire down. We must make our stand here and now. Now, are you with me?” I asked. I wondered who the “Seven” were, but that question would have to wait.

“Yes, sir!” was their reply.

“Excellent. Then lead the way,” I ordered.

“Sir, before we go we should explain to you how we avoid detection by the Magi. Darnath will go in front of us, just a hundred meters or so. Luke will trail behind the same distance and Gafar will be with our group. With the three of them strung out like that we get a good coverage of telepathic scanning, allowing us to detect the Magi and their troops long before they see us. When one of the telepaths detects a Magi scan passing through, you will see us all freeze. It is important to take your cue from that, sir, as there will not be enough time to warn you verbally. When you see us all freeze, you will have to rely on your thought shield to keep you hidden. If we are detected they will attack us within minutes. We have been doing this for a while now, and we should be able to make it all the way there undetected,” Jerran said.

With that we headed out into the tunnels, and once there we all put on our night vision goggles so that we could see. The group moved rather slowly. Calling it a fast walk would be a stretch. Jerran explained to me that they had to go at a gentle speed in order to focus on their telepathic scanning. This slow travel allowed me time to pick their brains a bit. “Major, I have a few questions for you while we walk, if you do not mind, while it is safe.”

“Certainly, sir,” he replied.

I wondered where to start. I decided it might be best to start with simple, practical questions. “Okay, you told me the command word for the wands; I assume that means you can read the writing on them?” I asked.

“Yes, sir, and so can you,” he answered. “Sir, these wands and staves are controlled by force of will. You aim them by looking at your target and willing the wand to hit it. You control the strength of the bolt by how forcefully you will it to be, and you read the command words merely by willing them into a language you can read. Try it, sir. Take out a wand and focus on the writing, and will it to be understandable.”

Well, that did not seem logical, willing words to be readable, but it did fit everything else they said about the wands. So I pulled one out and attempted to do just that. It took a few minutes but suddenly the writing was clear and I could easily read the command word. “Incredible,” I said with a slight gasp.

In response I heard a slight giggle out of Kellyn. “Sir, that was exactly my reaction.”

Excellent; not only had I learned how to read the command words on the wands, I had also managed to crack the ice a bit in this group. “Well then, something does not make any sense. If the wands are this easy to use, why did the young Magus I fought in the corridor appear shocked when I used the wand on him?”

“Well, sir, you’re right. Something does not make sense and it has bothered all of us,” was Jerran’s reply. He seemed to catch himself, and the look on his face indicated that he had not meant to say that out loud.

“Go on, Major,” I prompted.

“It’s just that ... well, sir, don’t take this wrong, but you should not exist,” was his reply. He paused to gather his thoughts and I waited for him to continue. “Sir, as you no doubt know the Black Adders are a group of master-level psionics sent here to determine if there was any way to protect against or block psionic powers, especially telepathic powers. What you may not know is that we are not merely one group; we are all that there is. That is to say, anyone who ever reached any degree of significant psionic power was sent here. You see, the colony doubles as quarantine to protect the Empire from us. Sure, there are much lesser psionics out there, such as Larath on your ship, a low-level empath. They pose no real danger to the Empire, unlike us, apparently. The problem is, sir: given what you can do, you should have been sent here a long time ago. Not only that, but your thought shield is what we were sent here to discover, and failed to do.”

“What do you mean, ‘failed?’ You seem to successfully hide from the Magi.”

“Not like you do, sir. You turn completely invisible to all sensors. We merely trick the sensors into thinking we are something else. In addition, your thought shield completely blocks our telepaths’ ability to read you, something no one has been able to do before, not even the Magi. You asked if we would accept you as one of us, when in reality you should have been one of us to begin with and imprisoned here long ago.”

Just when I thought I was getting somewhere, they had to toss all this in. The colony was a prison disguised as a psionic research center disguised as a bioresearch lab? No wonder they seemed a bit reserved with me. Based on what they were saying, I should have been locked up with them, not be a ranking officer on the flagship of the Imperial Fleet. “Well, I assure you that I knew nothing about this, but what you said does raise a question. If you never succeeded in creating a thought shield, how did you know that I could do it and what I call it?” That question seemed to catch them all off guard. It was like catching a child with his hand in the cookie jar.

“I am sorry, sir,” started Gafar. “When we pulled you from the fight, I probed your mind to make sure you were on our side. Of course at that time I could not read you because you had your thought shield up, but later when you were just waking up I was listening for your thoughts, and your first one was, ‘I need to get my thought shield back up’ and then you disappeared from my ability to read you.”

“Good work, Gafar,” I said. I did not like the idea of being probed like that but I needed to keep the unity of the group. “I would have done exactly the same in your position.”

Suddenly they all froze in place. I remembered what they had said about that back when we started out so I too froze, and made sure my thought shield was as effective as I could make it. Then I saw a thin wall of light coming down the corridor at great speed. No one moved, so I too stayed put. As the light passed over each of the Black Adders I briefly saw them turn into little pebbles. Then as the light passed over me I saw myself completely disappear. The light passed through me as if I was not there, not even a shadow. As soon as the light passed out of sight I turned to Gafar and asked, “Did they see us?”

Gafar looked a bit surprised at the question, but answered, “No, sir, not at all. But I did sense that they are fervently searching for you. Apparently you have them greatly worried. I expect we will see the Greenskins increasing their patrols looking for you. Sir, if I may be so bold, how did you know when to ask that question?”

“That is an odd question, Gafar. I merely waited until the light from their scan passed out of view,” I responded.

“Light, sir? There was no visible light. Sir, are you saying you can actually see their scans?” asked Gafar.

“You cannot?” was my feeble reply.

“Sir, if you do not mind, can you tell us exactly what you saw?” asked Major Jerran.

“Sure. There was a very thin wall of light that came down the corridor and passed over us. As it passed over each of you, you briefly turned into pebbles. When it reached me it passed over me as if I was not there at all. It continued down the corridor and out of sight. What did you see?”

“Nothing, sir. The telepaths can sense it coming, but none of us can actually see it,” answered Major Jerran.

As we started walking again I asked, “If you could not see it and only Gafar, Darnath and Luke could sense it, how did you know when to stop?”

“Sir, Gafar warned us telepathically. He cannot warn you the same way because of your shield, and it is too dangerous for you to lower it at this time,” was Jerran’s reply.

So that explained why they were so quiet unless I was talking to them. They communicated telepathically. “Okay, so how does this all relate back to the wand? And how come I was not sent here with you?” I asked.

“Well, sir, your second question we cannot answer, but the first is simple. You see, only either a master-level psionic or a Magus can use the wand. The ability to focus one’s willpower is an extremely rare knack that one must be born with. The Magi thought, as we did, that all the people in the Empire that could pull off such a feat were already here. When you pulled out and used the wand, your attempt should have failed.”

“Perhaps that is why the Magi attacked here first,” I said.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, it sounds like the Black Adders are the greatest single threat to the Magi, and as such a surprise attack on them in the first battle would be the most logical move,” was my answer. “The Magi must be wondering how many more Black Adder cells are out there, since I apparently shattered their idea that you were all that existed.”

Chapter Fourteen

We traveled for a while in silence as I thought over all the new information I had. I had a lot more questions to ask but wanted to sift through the data a bit first. Suddenly, I saw Darnath jogging back towards us, and Luke came jogging up from behind.

“Greenskin patrol, twenty strong, heading this way,” he reported.

“Sir, we should hide. Right now the Magi have no idea where you are. If we fight, then this hallway will be flooded with reinforcements,” suggested Major Jerran.

“I agree, but where?” I asked.

Then they all gathered up tight near a wall and pulled me in. Next I saw Andreya waving her arms around in the air as if drawing something with both hands. Soon after, a semi-transparent rock wall appeared and completely surrounded us. It was not long after that I saw the Greenskins coming down the corridor. I held my breath as they filed past at a fast march. Once they were out of sight, I saw Andreya relax a little and the wall disappeared.

“Amazing. I take it all they saw was a rock outcropping?” I asked.

“Exactly, sir, and if they reached out to touch it, they would have felt it too. Their own minds make it real,” answered Andreya.

That was probably the same thing the Magi had brought against us in orbit. It was not a new weapon at all; just one that the Empire had decided to keep secret and confine to this planet, a move which could end up being the worst tactical mistake of this century.

“So then are the Magi also master-level psionics?” I asked as we resumed our walk.

“No, sir, we do not know what they are. On the surface some of our powers and theirs look similar, but in reality they are extremely different. For example, they can scan for us, as you saw, but they do not have any other telepathic abilities that we can detect, nor can they block our powers any more than we can. The only thing that stops us from probing them constantly for all their information is that they can detect us when we do that and locate us instantly. But it’s more than just different powers, it is more like a different form of energy completely. We do not truly understand how either our powers or theirs work, but we can tell they are fundamentally different,” answered Jerran.

“No telepathic powers, but earlier you said they used a telepath to fake Lieutenant Tom’s message?” I asked.

“Well, sir, there are different degrees of Magi, and the most advanced ones break all the rules,” he replied.

Before I could ask for more information, Darnath came back to the group and said, “The storage depot is ahead. It looks like two Magi apprentices are guarding it.”

“You know their ranks?” I asked.

“Not completely, but we have a general idea. It appears that seven older humans rule them, and they are by far the most powerful. Under those there appear to be a few levels of power, and each lower level addresses the people in the levels above them as “master”. During the early battles we discovered the names of a couple of the lower ranks. “Apprentice” appears to be the lowest,” answered Darnath. Well, that at least explained who the “Seven” were.

“Well, if there are only two, I want you six to stay hidden. Right now they probably assume I am the only threat on the planet, and I would like to keep it that way. About how long do we have from when the two Magi see me until reinforcements arrive?” I asked.

“On average it takes them about five to seven minutes to respond, sir,” answered Gafar. “But that assumes they are completely unprepared. They can be anywhere in less than a minute if they are fully prepared to move.”

“Okay, then: the instant it is safe to do so, charge in there, get all the explosives you can carry and get out. I will be looking for detonators and timers. If anything happens do not wait for me. Head down this corridor and hide when you get far enough to be safe. If I do not show myself in fifteen minutes, carry on the mission without me,” I ordered.

“Yes, sir,” was the reluctant reply.

I drew out two of my wands, one in each hand, took a deep breath to steady myself, and then slipped around the corner to where the guards were. The instant I could see them I fired both wands, one at each of them in rapid succession. Both of them were caught completely off-guard and were killed instantly. I then turned both wands on the door and fired again, blowing the door wide open. As soon as I was sure the room was secure I waved the Black Adders in and started grabbing anything that looked like a timer or detonator.

“Here they come,” whispered Gafar.

“Get out,” I ordered.

Everyone sprinted down the hall a mere few seconds ahead of me. Before I got far I felt an icy cold chill on my back. When I turned and looked I saw one of the older Magi standing with staff in hand just a few meters behind me.

“Pity you have to die, Vydor. Had you been born amongst us you would have been a great power,” he said.

Not wasting any time, I pointed both wands at him. He did not seem at all worried about it and casually lowered his staff. I quickly re-aimed my wands at the ceiling and fired two bolts, causing it to collapse. When the dust cleared the corridor was completely blocked off and he was nowhere to be found. I ran to catch up with the Black Adders.

As I rounded a corner I saw them tucked tight against a wall with a translucent rock wall in front of them. As I approached them, Darnath reached out and pulled me in while gesturing to be quiet. Almost as soon as I was behind the wall, a squad of Greenskins came running down the hall heading in the direction I had just come from. They passed us without even a glance.

“It is clear,” said Gafar.

“We need to get out of here quickly. It will not be long before this whole area is filled with Greenskin patrols,” I said.

Darnath took off on point as before and we all moved out. The next hour was spent constantly hiding from scans and dodging patrols. We traveled deeper and deeper into what looked like older and less-used pathways. Eventually we reached a small hollow just off the main path. “Gafar, is anyone near us at all?” I asked.

“No, sir, we appear to have completely avoided their search net,” was his reply.

“Excellent. Rest here in this hollow then, and we should eat while we still can,” I ordered.

For a while it was quiet as we feasted on the food the Black Adders had been stealing from the Magi. Each of them looked scared, tired and spent. I wondered if they would have the fortitude to carry on. We had too much information on the Magi now; we had to get off this planet with it.

“Sir, can I ask you something?” asked Gafar.

“Certainly, feel free to ask whatever is on your mind,” I replied.

“Well, sir, we know that just as we got away one of the Seven appeared in the hallway. What happened?” he asked.

“Not much, really. He said something about how it was time for me to die as I pointed my wands at him. He did not seem at all concerned about the wands, so I blasted the ceiling over his head instead, which caused part of the tunnel to collapse. I do not know what happened to him, only that when the dust settled he was gone. I assume he was either killed by the rubble, or was just on the other side of it. After that, I ran until I saw you,” was my reply.

“That was a smart move, sir,” started Gafar. “The Seven have a way to block the wands; they seem to catch them with either their hands or their staves. Had you tried that you would be dead now. At least one of them seems to be completely immune to any wand or staff attack.”

“Catch them?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. We found out in our fights with them that not even staves can generate enough power to overcome this ability of theirs,” he replied.

“You know, I wish I could have seen your squad in action against the Magi. I bet it was a sight to behold,” I said, hoping to instill some pride.

“Oh, it was, sir,” called out Kellyn. “They were brilliant!”

“Sir, if you want, I can show you,” said Darnath. “You would just have to let down your thought shield enough for me to show you.”

“Is that safe? I thought you said never to let it down?” I asked.

“Sir, Gafar and Luke will alert us if anyone looks our way, and while I do not know how you create your thought shield, I suspect you can crack it just enough to let me in without giving away our position,” answered Darnath.

I thought about it for a minute. On one hand I did not like the idea of letting a telepath poke around my head, but on the other hand I suspected this was a test. “Very well, give me a moment and I will see what I can think of,” I replied.

I envisioned my thought shield as a rock sphere around me, completely and totally protecting me from everything, with no doors or windows. Then I pictured a door on it, and I cracked it just a little. Just on the other side of the door I saw what I knew to be Darnath, but he looked more like a spirit than a person. He was holding a box. I reached out and took it inside my sphere, closing and erasing the door behind me. I opened the box to look inside when out of it came what looked like a holographic movie which wrapped around me. Suddenly I was elsewhere ...

Chapter Fifteen

I was crouched behind a makeshift barricade firing my wands for all they were worth. Bolts of energy were flying all around us as the Greenskins advanced on our position. Humans were coming up behind them using portable shields to protect themselves from our weapons. They fired through the ranks of the Greenskins, not seeming to care if they killed a few of them in the process. As they slowly approached it became evident that there was no way to stop them. There were just too many of the Greenskins, and we could not penetrate the shields the humans were using.

A loud, gruff voice called out from behind me, "We will make our stand here! They will not reach the primary computer core! This far and no further will they come! Today they will learn the true strength of an Imperial soldier!"

I recognized the voice to be that of General Tizar, head of the colony's security forces. I knew we were outgunned and outnumbered, but still that brief speech helped bolster my confidence and bravery. I looked over at Andreyra who was next to me behind the barricade. "Andreyra, remember the idea we talked about a few months ago, the one where we combine our powers?"

"Yes, Darnath. Now is a good time to find out if it would work," she replied.

"Indeed," I replied. I put down my wands and focused all my power on the approaching army of Greenskins. I dumped on them all my personal fear and feelings of helplessness. I assaulted them mentally with all the power I could muster. Andreyra used her powers to alter the appearance of the Greenskins, making them think that we had rushed their line and were in amongst them. It worked beautifully. Their advance halted and they turned on each other. The humans behind them were screaming out orders, trying to get control of the situation but the Greenskins were overcome by fear of each other and did not respond. Soon all of them were massacred, bodies piled everywhere.

"Well done, Andreyra," I said.

"Thank you, but they still keep coming," she said.

All the Greenskins were gone, but the humans kept advancing. Andreyra and I were too drained to try another attack like we did to the Greenskins, so we grabbed up some wands and fired for all we were worth. The shield line of humans just kept inching forward. It seemed we were doomed when a large explosion ripped through a section of wall between our position and the advancing humans. Then suddenly all the bodies of the Greenskins lifted off the ground and flew right at the humans!

The last of my fellow Black Adders poured through the breach in the wall wielding all their psionic powers in perfect unison. "Charge!" came the command and we all rushed forth. It was strange to follow flying bodies into battle, but they succeeded in breaking through the shield wall. For the first time since the invasion we were winning! As we reached the former position of the humans many of us ditched our wands and took up the more powerful staves that the enemy had recently started using against us. Just when we thought we had them on the run, the others appeared.

The Seven, as we took to calling them. They seemed to be the greatest of the Magi, and ruled over them. They just stood in the middle of the corridor with no protection. "Shields!" came an order from someone, and everyone who could grabbed up shields from the fallen Magi and formed a wall with them in front of us. Just as we got our shield in place they started to fire. The shields held, but we had no opening to fire back. It seemed we would be locked in this stalemate until the shields finally gave out, but then one of the Seven stopped firing and spun his staff around until it was vertical and while chanting slammed it into the ground. The force of that blow shook the very foundations of the colony and sent us flying. The shield wall was broken and they proceeded to pound us with their bolts. Screams of dying people were all around me as I lifted a shield back into place and began to return fire. Soon others began to do the same, using the small area of safety I had created. One of the telekinetics behind me started throwing shields at the Seven, but two of them successfully blocked everything thrown at them. Then the one in the front traced a semicircle towards us in the air while chanting. Suddenly an arc of energy leaped forward and slammed into us. I was thrown against the wall, and then everything went dark ...

I gasped for breath as suddenly I was back in the hollow with the Black Adders. The room was still spinning a bit, and my body ached from where I had been hit during the battle ... but it was not I who had fought that battle, it was Darnath. My mind reeled, and when I got my senses back I looked at everyone again. I felt as if I knew them better. I recognized all of them from that fight. They had all been there by my side; well, by Darnath's side. "Oh, wow ... I feel as if I was there," I said.

"Yes, sir. I gave you a copy of my memory of the event, so in a way you were there. You experienced everything that I did, and know everything that I know about that battle," said Darnath.

"What happened after that?" I asked. I needed to know more.

"Well, sir, I was the first to recover," started Kellyn. "I heard sounds of fighting further down the hall, but knew I had to tend to the wounded first. I could only find five other survivors. I treated their wounds as best I could there in the hallway. I was not able to do much before more of the Magi came back and found us. Jerran ordered us to run as he opened fire with a staff he had recovered. To everyone's surprise he did not shoot at the Magi, but rather the wall next to them. This ruptured the side of the colony and opened the chamber to the outside atmosphere, sucking the Magi out in the process. We were far enough away to be saved by one of the colony's airlocks, which slid shut and kept us alive. From there we worked our way back to the central computer core, hoping to unite with anyone that was left. By the time we reached it the battle was over. There was nothing but bodies and pieces of bodies everywhere. We tried to find ..." At that point she broke down crying. Andreyra did her best to comfort her, and everyone was quiet for a while.

"Black Adders, I am greatly impressed and proud to know you. General Tizar was right; you showed them what an Imperial soldier really is: strong, unwavering, loyal and fearless. You kept fighting, even when it was obvious you could not win. Even now, months later, you are still fighting. You could have given up long ago, but instead you held out. First it was to get information to Tom and his forces, then to my squad and now finally you are attempting to get to the gate and cut off all hope of retreat by the Magi." I paused and looked them over, then said, "As ranking battlefield officer I hereby award you all with the Medal of Honor. You are without question some of the finest men and women this Empire has ever produced!"

They all looked stunned, but squared their shoulders. A little bit of pride and strength seemed to creep back into them. "Now then, let's clean up this camp and get to that gate." More than ever I wanted to get them safely off this rock. I looked at Darnath and asked, "Did you detect any indication that they suspected I was not alone?"

"No, sir. As far as we can tell, your plan worked. They think it is still only you," he responded.

"Good. So they must know there are only three logical places for me to go: the central computer, the exit hatch or the gate. They might assume I do not know about the gate, but that would be a foolish risk. They do not strike me as the type to take unnecessary risks, so we should assume the gate will be guarded and watched. Major Jerran, can you take us around to the opposite side of the gate from the storeroom that we just came from?" I asked. "That might put us behind their defenses."

"Yes, sir, but that will add at least an hour to the walk. From here I would estimate four or five hours until we reach the gate," was his reply.

"Fine. Take us that way and stop us about an hour before the gate for a final rest and preparations," I ordered. As I leaned on my right arm in an attempt to stand, a blinding pain shot through me causing me to fall back to the ground where I was sitting.

Darnath noticed immediately and asked, "Sir, what's wrong?"

"Aah, I think I dislocated my shoulder, I am not sure how. No matter; if you will just help me pop it back in, I will be fine to travel," I said through gritted teeth.

Then Kellyn came over, smiled at me and said, "Sir, just relax. This won't hurt a bit." I doubted that her petite frame could support enough muscle power to readjust my shoulder, but even more I doubted that it would not hurt! Ah, well, I had better cooperate; she was, after all, their medic. She knelt in front of me and closed her eyes, placed her right hand behind my shoulder, and pressed her left hand ever so gently on the front of my shoulder. I assumed that she was about to examine it, but then I felt warmth passing between her hands and moving through my body. Her hands had a faint pink glow

about them, as if they were generating the heat themselves, and instinctively I wanted to jerk away, but I was paralyzed by her touch. I felt my bones move and shift back into place. She then looked up directly into my eyes and I felt a connection that I had never known before. Instantly it was as if she could see through to my inner most being and I could see hers. Hers was a beautiful pool of color that shimmered constantly, but I feared what she saw in mine. I knew what was there. A look of horror passed over her face, and then it was replaced by stubborn determination. She started to say something, but before she could speak Darnath warned us that a Magi scan was nearing us. Fearing she would not be able to react in time, I quickly reached out to her, pulled her close to my body and envisioned my thought shield expanding to surround both of us. I got it up barely in time, a mere second before the light from the scan passed over us.

Once it passed, I tried to stand but got very light-headed, and once more fell to the ground. This time Kellyn was there to slow my fall. "Now what is wrong with me?" I asked.

"Sir, you overextended yourself by hiding me from the scan," answered Kellyn, who started digging in her pack.

"Sir, from what you have told us I assume you haven't used your powers very much before coming here, and since coming here you have been using them non-stop. That alone would be pushing your mental strength to the limit, but then to extend your shield to cover Kellyn ... well, until just a minute ago I thought that was impossible. It must have been very difficult, and it has exhausted you," stated Darnath.

"Here, sir. This will help clear your head a bit," said Kellyn as she handed me what looked like a bar of chocolate.

"Candy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. We discovered a while back that there is a chemical compound that your body depletes as you use your powers. We can manufacture it, but it tastes horrible. So I prefer to disguise it in candy. It is no substitute for a good meal and rest, but it will help you get by until we can manage that," answered Kellyn.

After eating the candy bar, I did feel better and was able to stand. "Amazing, my arm feels like it was never hurt. No wonder they call you a master healer!" I said. "But how in the world did I get hurt in the first place?"

"Sorry, sir, I should have known that would happen," started Darnath. "When I transferred my memory of the battle to you, your mind completely re-enacted the fight. For most people that is the extent of it, but for those of us who are more psychically sensitive, the re-enactment often extends to the muscles. You see, when I hit that wall I broke my collarbone, so when that happened your body must have had a muscle spasm which threw your shoulder out of joint."

"I see. Well, since that is now all behind us, let's get moving," I said. I was not sure how I felt about what had just happened, not only with my shoulder but also with Kellyn. For the moment I would just move on to the next step and put it away to think about later. I noticed that Kellyn began walking much closer to me after our encounter. She seemed a bit worried about me. I wanted to blame her concern on my recent collapse, but the image burned into my mind was that look of horror I had seen on her face. She saw something when she fixed my shoulder that had her very worried about me. There was only one thing that I could think of which that might be, but surely she did not think she could fight the dark figure who waited for me?

Chapter Sixteen

We moved out and traveled in silence for a while. There was something that had been on my mind, and this seemed like a good time to ask about it. “Major Jerran, when the first of the Magi spoke to us, he called his group the Magi; later, when I met you, you also referred to them as the Magi; yet as far as I know Larath coined that name a couple of weeks ago and it was known only by a few select members of the Dragon Claw’s crew. So how did that name get known here?”

“Sir, forgive me, but the better question is: How did Larath know that name?” was his answer.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Well, sir, we call them the Magi, because when our telepaths probed them we learned that is what they call themselves. This was long before even Lieutenant Tom arrived,” he answered.

“I see your point,” I said and nothing further was spoken about that. This was not the first time a thread of information had led back to Larath. What part did he play in all this? I was still missing some key piece of information. I knew there was some piece of data that, once known, would shed a light on the rest of what we knew and would make sense of it. I had no idea where to find it, however. Then I remembered the book I carried with me. It was written in a language that looked similar to that on the wands. Maybe that was a clue.

“Major, the writing on the wands and staves, do you ever see it elsewhere?” I asked.

“Yes, sir, but only on their clothing and some of their jewelry,” he answered.

“Then this is not their primary written language, I assume?” I prompted.

“No, sir. They have another language for that. It looks somewhat similar but we cannot read it,” he answered. He paused a moment then continued, “One of our late members could read it. He learned it by telepathically stealing the information from one of the Magi, but he was killed before he could pass it on.”

“If he could do it then can Darnath, Luke, or Gafar also do it?” I asked.

“Yes, sir, but not without giving away our position to the Magi,” he answered.

“Well, it is good to know it is an option, if a dangerous one,” I said. I was about to ask about the book when we caught up with Darnath.

“Sir, this is the last safe place to rest. Just around the corner is an automated security checkpoint. Once we pass that we will be about ninety minutes from the gate, but under constant threat from patrols and surveillance,” reported Darnath.

“Okay, then set up camp here and let’s have one more meal. We do not know when our next chance will be,” I ordered. As everyone got busy I turned to Darnath and asked, “Can we get by this checkpoint undetected?”

“Yes, sir. We will be able to walk right through it. Your thought shield will make you completely invisible to it, and we have our own methods that work as well,” he answered.

“How does my thought shield render me invisible to electronic sensors?” I asked.

“Well, sir, we do not know for sure because there is no way to measure or record what happens, but when psionics decide to use their powers to hide, they disappear from all sensors as well. The prevailing theory is that the body’s natural electromagnetic field is somehow being affected, thus rendering the sensors useless,” he answered.

“Interesting. So then let me ask you this, if I had on my shoulder a standard navy issue medical alert patch and put up my thought shield, what would happen?” I asked.

“Well, sir, the patch would lose its ability to read you, so all your vital signs would register zero and the patch would assume you were dead,” he answered. “Sir, I take it you ask because that happened?”

“Yes, and that is exactly what happened. Well, at least that mystery is solved,” I said. “Okay, everyone bring me what you were able to get from the storeroom and I will see if I can figure out how to make a nice bomb.”

“Sir, if you do not mind, I think I should take care of that since I am a demolitions expert,” Major Jerran said with a hint of fear in his voice. Perhaps he was worried how I would react to that statement.

“Absolutely. I have some training, but defer to your superior skill,” I said and passed him all that I had. “Please make a timer that will give us fifteen seconds once activated,” I ordered. Then a thought occurred to me. “I should have realized you would have demolitions training. With your telekinetic skill you can place the explosives easily with a level of safety far beyond that of the average person.”

“Yes, sir, all telekinetics are required to get certified as demolitions experts for that very reason,” he replied and then got to work on sorting out the jumble of parts we had given him.

“Sir, I need to tell you something more about the path ahead,” said Darnath.

“Speak freely, Darnath,” I prompted.

“Well, sir, the corridor is likely to have audio sensors to record any sound. So we will have to be as quiet as possible, as our powers will have no impact on such recordings,” he said. He looked like he wanted to say more but kept quiet.

“Go on, Darnath, do not be afraid to talk to me. We are in this together and it is important that we keep communications open,” I said.

“Sir, well . . . if you don’t mind, I will let Kellyn explain since it is her idea,” he said.

“Very well, Kellyn, I am all ears,” I prompted, wondering what was up.

“Well, sir, please forgive us but when we first met up with you we weren’t sure what to think of you. Of course we would follow the chain of command, there was no question about that; but you were an outsider to us, and we did not know if we could truly trust you. We have been imprisoned in this colony for a very long time, some of us all our lives, and that does not exactly breed trust for official representatives of the Empire.” She paused here. They were clearly worried about how I was going to react to all this. I just waited quietly, doing my best to give no indication of how I felt about this admission. Then she continued, “Sir, back in the tunnel when I healed your shoulder I probed much deeper into you than I should have, but we had to know what kind of person you really were at the core. You have all the indications of a psychic, but you were not imprisoned with us. We had begun to wonder if maybe you were a plant by the Magi, or something worse.”

She paused again, as if afraid to continue. I remembered the memory that Darnath gave me of her. She always appeared timid, yet when it came down to fight or flight she stood with the best of them. Eventually she continued, “Sir, I know it was wrong to probe you like that but the connection we made while I healed you was the first time any of us could see behind your thought shield and I was sure it was our only chance to find out for sure who you really were.” She stopped there and locked gazes with me, and seemed to gain confidence. “Sir, I learned that you are exactly what you represented yourself as, and more. We know now that we could have trusted you completely from the start.” She stopped there and waited. They were all waiting for my reaction.

“Kellyn, well done,” I said. “If we were back on the Dragon Claw I would request that you be promoted to my team. You saw a small window of opportunity and used it. Most people would have hesitated, and with that scan so close behind when you healed me, the chance would have been lost for good,” I responded. I did not like all this probing, but if I had been in her position I would have done exactly the same thing and I needed to keep that in mind. She saw a golden opportunity and took it. It was exactly the kind of thing I tried so hard to teach my men back on the ship. The fact that I had been the target did not change that, and I could not let that interfere with my judgment.

“There is more, sir,” started Gafar.

“Go on,” I said. Now what?

“Well, sir, we have known for some time now that we can safely bring you into our telepathic communications link. You see, when Darnath gave you that memory it was really a final test to be sure we could.” He paused, and then continued, “We did not mention this before because we felt we needed a way to talk that you could not hear in case you were not what you appeared to be. But now we know

you are trustworthy and you definitely have the gift of psionic abilities, though untrained; so we can bring you into that communications network.”

I thought about this for a while. These Black Adders kept proving to be a lot more resourceful than I gave them credit for. I looked at each of them, lingering briefly on Kellyn. I could not get that look of horror out of my mind. If we ever got time alone, I would have to ask her about it. “Seeing that we will have to be silent for the rest of the journey, this is good timing. What do I need to do?”

“Well, sir, all you have to do is let me reach you through your shield in the same way as you did with Darnath. You see, only telepaths can communicate telepathically. So what I do is act as a communications hub linking up all the minds in our little squad. It will make more sense once we connect, so just let me through your shield and I will take care of the rest,” Gafar said.

Well, this would be interesting. I envisioned a small room inside my thought shield, and in that room I pictured a table and chairs for us all to sit at. Then I created a door through the shield to that room and set it to allow Gafar and the others in. As soon as I did this Gafar appeared in one of the seats, and one by one the others appeared in silence. I created a thought picture of me in that room and asked, “*Are you sure that the Magi will not be able to hear us in here?*” It was a silly question, but I needed to say something to break the ice.

The image that was Gafar said, “*Yes, sir. No one can be part of this that I do not allow.*”

With some effort I was able to turn off the image so that I could focus on the world around me without breaking the communication channel. “*Okay, well, it might take me a while to get used to talking without saying anything, but I will try,*” I said.

“*You will be fine, sir, you’re a natural!*” said Kellyn. “*Now, I want you to eat another chocolate bar. You need to keep your strength up, at least until we can find a safer place to rest,*” she said as she handed me a candy bar.

“*Sir, the bomb is ready. This red button is the trigger. When we are ready to use it we just connect the button here, and press it. Once set you will have around fifteen seconds,*” said Major Jerran.

“*Around fifteen seconds?*” I asked.

“*Sorry, sir, but we did not have a timer, so I just used enough fuse line to roughly provide the delay you wanted,*” he responded.

Anyone watching us would have been baffled by what they saw. We used no audible language but interacted just like people who were talking. “*Well, that will have to do, then. If we are ready we should move out.*” I had lost all track of time down there and did not know how much time we had left before the Dragon Claw began its attack.

As Darnath moved ahead to take the forward guard position, I felt our net stretch and soon I could see what Darnath saw ahead of us, and as Luke fell behind to take the rearguard position I could see what he saw at the same time. I was silent for a while as I made sense of seeing through three pairs of eyes at once. They talked amongst themselves about various options in the route we could take, and other mission-related topics. The free exchange of ideas between them was a masterful demonstration of how team planning should work, but never seems to. This medium of communication seemed to allow a more pure exchange of ideas. They could talk with any combination of the five senses at once, so instead of just describing an idea, they could show everyone what they were picturing.

Ahead through Darnath’s eyes I saw the entrance to the room that contained the gate. There were two guards, firmly entrenched behind a partial shield wall with wands at the ready, scanning the corridor in both directions. Darnath waited for us to catch up.

“*I do not like this. They are too well entrenched there. I doubt we could get past them before reinforcements arrived,*” I said. I checked my gear to see if I had any hand-grenades left. I was sure I did not but hoped I was wrong. As I had thought I did not have any, but in looking for them I unintentionally sent the image of my idea to all the Black Adders.

“*Sir, that is a great idea. I can take a small part of the explosives from the bomb and make one,*” said Major Jerran.

“*Without a timer, how will you detonate it?*” I asked.

“Well, sir, the stuff we were able to get from the storeroom is notoriously unstable; it should be easy to detonate it with a light blast from a wand.” As he said that I had an image in my mind of the explosive drifting down the corridor near the ceiling out of sight, and then myself jumping out and shooting it.

“That sounds ... looks ... should work,” I said, stumbling for the right word to use. *“Since the wands are targeted by sight, can I use the view I have from Darnath’s eyes to target, or does it have to be mine?”*

“Sir, either will work, but you still need a clear line-of-sight path for the bolt to travel,” answered Luke.

“Okay, here is the plan. Kellyn, you and Andreyra will go through the gate first. Andreyra, once through the gate use your power to hide the fact that we are all coming through. Kellyn will guard you with her wands and should you be attacked she is your best chance of survival until the rest of us arrive.”

“Jerran, as soon as you are ready, send in the bomb,” I ordered. Soon after, I saw the package traveling in the shadows towards the unsuspecting Magi. As soon as it was in place, I rolled out into the corridor on my belly and fired my wand. When the bolt hit the package there was a bright flash of light, followed by a loud rumble. I covered my head but could still see, thanks to my connection to Darnath.

The bomb destroyed a section of the corridor and the two Magi were dead, but the passage was partly blocked by rubble. I ran forward intending to climb over the pile of rubble when I felt myself lifted up and over it. As soon as I was back on my feet I looked back to see the others flying over, too. It took me a moment to realize that Major Jerran had lifted us all over.

As soon as everyone was over Andreyra and Kellyn approached the gate, and Major Jerran began stringing out the explosives. I felt Andreyra focus on the gate and concentrate on a single thought, *“A place of safety.”* Then in the center of the gate a blue, swirling light started to grow until it filled the gate. She and Kellyn charged through, followed by the three telepaths. As Gafar passed through the gate I lost touch with all of them.

“The bomb is live!” called out Jerran, the last one to pass through the gate.

I started to count down from fifteen in my head. I had to wait to make sure the bomb was not interfered with before I left. Just as I started to count, the pile of rubble blocking the corridor dissolved and one of the Seven stood there, lowering his staff at me. *“You are too late, old man!”* I taunted, knowing that time was up and dove through the gate. When Andreyra activated it, she did it the same way we used the wands, so I did the same, focusing on Kellyn as my target and hoping for the best.

Chapter Seventeen

As I entered the gate everything around me turned into an iridescent blue. It was similar to jump space, but I was much freer in my movements. It was not like being in a tunnel or a room, more an endless sea of blue. Looking back over my shoulder I saw him again, that black specter that always joined me. This time he was much nearer, and coming for me. Instinctively I knew that if he reached me I would die, and I could not let my team down. I was still holding a wand, so I turned it on him and poured into it all my anger over the death of the Dark Knights. The blast hit him and sent him reeling back, just long enough for me to fall through the other side of the gate.

As I came through the gate I felt myself falling towards the floor, but something caught me just in time. Soon I felt the Black Adders silently communicating with me once more, all urging me to be quiet and not move. I wanted to scream in pain, as it felt like my back was on fire, but looking through their eyes I saw Andreyra maintaining an illusionary wall that perfectly mirrored the wall behind us, and an old man staring at the wall as if searching for us. I did my best not to move, not even to breathe, for what seemed like years and eventually he turned and left.

Once he was gone, I felt myself being lowered to the ground and immediately Kellyn rushed to my side. *"Sir, it looks like you took a hit just before you made it through the gate. You are hurt pretty badly; I will do what I can."* With that I felt her warm hands on my back and energy leaving her, passing through me. As she worked I lost the communication link with the Adders, but I felt a deeper connection to her. I felt her think, *"Sir, I know what demon chases you, and so long as there is any power left in me, it will never catch you."* Then I had a vision of her standing between myself and that dark specter. She was holding up her staff and glowing brightly while the specter fought fruitlessly against her.

Then it all faded away and I felt a weight on my back. Soon I was able to re-establish communication with the Black Adders, but Kellyn was not there. *"She is overtired, sir. We need to find a place for her to rest,"* said Jerran.

She was the weight on my back. With Gafar's help I was able to get up, and pick her up. *"Then let's find a safe place,"* I said. Andreyra lowered her illusionary wall and we began to move out when he appeared again.

It was the same man as before. He was wearing a long, flowing, dark purple robe covered in glowing symbols. He had a tall pointed hat and a long white beard. In his hand he held a staff, but one completely unlike the sleek black staves of the Magi. This one looked more like a tree, with a crystal ball on top instead of leaves.

"Welcome, Black Adders, I have been waiting for you," he said in a grandfatherly voice. *"The little one needs rest, as do you all. Come, I will show you a safe place."*

With that he turned to leave, and I started to follow him. The others seemed uncomfortable with this, so I told them, *"My instincts say we can trust him, and rarely am I wrong about a person."*

That immediately put them at ease. I got the feeling from them that the instincts of a Black Adder were far better than any scanner. It was then I realized that they had finally accepted me as one of their own.

That room exited directly on to a stone spiral staircase. We followed the old man up the stairs to a heavy, wooden door. The door opened by itself with a loud creak as we approached. The room on the other side resembled a military barracks, with a line of four beds down each wall. In the center was a large table covered with food and drink. Once we were all in the room, the man said, *"I will return shortly. I must see to your safety."* With that, he closed the door and left.

I laid Kellyn down on one of the beds and asked, *"Can we do anything for her?"*

"No, sir. She just needs to sleep a while and she should recover completely," said Major Jerran.

I took some food and pulled up a chair next to her bed. *"Eat up and rest while we can,"* I ordered. *"Anyone have any idea where we are?"*

“Sir, this room is sealed. None of us can see beyond it. I assume this would also keep anyone from seeing in, so I dare not try to break the seal,” answered Luke.

“Very well. We wait then for our mysterious host to return,” I said.

We all ate and drank while we waited but there was not much conversation. No one seemed to like the fact that we had stepped out of one mystery into an even bigger one. I kept reliving that vision of Kellyn fighting the dark specter. What could it all mean?

“Sir, he is here,” Darnath said just before the door opened.

The old man entered the room, and pulled up a chair next to the table. After taking a drink he turned to us and said, “I know you have many questions for me. Let me see if I can answer the obvious ones first. My name is Mantis, and you are in my tower. I have been watching the developments of your battles for some time now, and when you opened the gate I intervened and redirected you here. You would probably like to know where my tower is. Well, that is complicated since it is not known for its ability to stay in one place. Relative to your understanding, it is best to think of it as lying on a planet in a different, but similar universe.” He stopped, looked at Andreya and said, “I must compliment you on your illusion. Masterfully done. I have not seen your equal in all my travels. Had I not personally redirected your journey to my gate, I would have never known you came through.”

Andreya blushed a little and said, “Thank you, sir.”

“Mantis, you said you were watching the colony and brought us here. Why?” I asked.

“Well, that is a very long story, but you need to hear it so I will do my best to be brief.” He paused and refilled his glass from the jug of mead that was on the table. “It starts in a time so far back that no one really knows how long ago it was. At that time the known universe was limited to just one planet, and all men could do was guess at the meaning of the lights in the sky. There were two powerful kingdoms on that planet, one in the east and one in the west. These two kingdoms hated each other, and were in a constant state of war. They were well matched, and locked in a stalemate for decades when the Kingdom of the East found the Tome of Power. The Tome of Power was a book that contained information on how to tap a power that no one had known even existed. It was a kind of energy that flowed through and around everything. Using the information in the book, it was discovered that some people were gifted with the ability to tap and channel this power. This gave the Kingdom of the East a powerful weapon to use against their hated enemy. Seven men were trained in what became known as the art of Sorcery. Those seven men wielded great power, the like of which had never been seen before, and they could conjure up foul beasts from the underworld to do battle for them. They could even animate the dead to continue to fight. It was not long before the Kingdom of the West was completely overthrown. The sorcerers then turned on their own king and seized the throne for themselves. That ushered in an era of darkness where the entire known world was forced into slavery. No one could resist their power.

“Then one day a young man appeared on the scene. History does not record much about him, but we know that he had great power of his own. His power surpassed even the combined power of the seven sorcerers, effortlessly turning back their beasts and spells. The sorcerers never came out to fight him, preferring to send their slaves to do it, but none of them could hurt him. He took on twelve apprentices to whom he taught his art. Once he felt they were sufficiently trained, he left. History does not record where he went, but we do know that the twelve moved to attack the sorcerers with great speed. Five of them were killed in the battles that followed, but they soon forced the sorcerers into hiding. It was then they took to calling themselves wizards.

“With the sorcerers gone, the seven remaining wizards freed the lands from the dark curses of the sorcerers and issued in an era of peace. The wizards began to train others in their arts so that there would always be someone around to defend the lands against the sorcerers should they return. The long and unbroken peace lulled the wizards into a false sense of safety, and they became lax in their vigil. Secretly the sorcerers returned, and following the example of the wizards began training others in their arts. Then one day they struck. Instead of just seven sorcerers there were hundreds, and they brought all kinds of foul creatures with them. The wizards rallied to defend the land but were forced to retreat from the northern continent.

“That brings us to where we sit today. The Second Great War between the wizards and the sorcerers is stuck at a perpetual stalemate. Both sides are scrambling to find some advantage over the other, and it seems we are doomed to relive the history all over again.”

“Okay, let me take a guess. The ones we call the Magi, you call sorcerers?” I asked.

“The title ‘Magi’ has been taken to refer to anyone who can tap the energy, so both wizards and sorcerers are considered to be Magi.”

“So it seems your war has spilled over into our Empire. Why?” I asked.

“Remember how this all started, how the Kingdom of the East and the Kingdom of the West were locked in a stalemate until the Tome of Power was found? The sorcerers are trying to repeat that feat now to break this stalemate. We do not know what they are looking for, or why they think they can find it in your Empire, but they are searching for something they think will give them the edge again. Of course that means we are doing everything we can to discover what they are looking for and claim it before they do. The obvious question to ask next is why we watched your fight with them and did not help. After all, the enemy of an enemy is a friend.” He paused to take out a small box from a hidden pocket in his robe. “Well, the answer is simple; to do so would devastate your lands. Let me show you something.” He traced a square in the air that somehow turned into a window. The view out the window was not something you would ever want to see. It was a war-torn land that looked like it could never again support life. The window faded and he said, “If we come and meet them in battle there, all your worlds could look like that.” He let that comment hang in the air.

I knew the power of the sorcerers, and if the wizards were equally powerful, then Mantis’ fear could very well be realized. “So the alternative is to sit back and hope you find this new weapon before they do?” I asked.

“Not a good plan, I know, but until recently it was the best plan we had.” He stopped and sighed. I could tell he was about to ask us to do something distasteful to him. “There is a better plan, but it will require all of you, and could very well be the death of you.”

“Mantis, we are Imperial soldiers. Death will not deter us from defending the Empire. It is obvious your enemy has made us an enemy, making us your friend for now. What is your plan?” I asked.

“In this box are seven rings. These are not ordinary rings, as you might guess. If you take them from the box and put them on, you will be signifying your acceptance of my proposal.” He pushed the box towards me, paused and looked us over. “Until recently, we knew nothing of your Empire or of any of the other nations existing in your universe. About fifty years ago we discovered that the sorcerers had begun to take an interest in you, so we investigated. At that time we saw no evidence that there were any Magi in your realm, so we were baffled by the sorcerers’ interest. We assumed they must be looking for reinforcements. Soon after, we discovered why they were searching your realm so heavily, and this worried us, so we began to study you closely. It was then that we learned of the Black Adders, and realized that any move the sorcerers made in your realm would start with them. So we planted a spy on the colony to monitor the situation for us. When the sorcerers made their move and took over the colony, our spy was killed with the rest. We thought the Black Adders had been wiped out. This was very troubling, as there was no one left in your realm capable of defending it. So we began searching for a plan that could save your realm without jeopardizing our own defenses.

“Well, I won’t bore you with the details; I will just say we came up with no plan that you would like. That all changed the day we discovered Vydor. It was obvious to us that he was gifted with the power to be a Magus, so we began to watch everything unfold. Then when he met up with the six of you, we had our answer.” He stopped to drink some more. “I should clear something up first; what you call psionics and what we call magic is one and the same. You are all Magi in your own right. Untrained and inexperienced, but that will all come with time. What we are proposing to you is that you seven form a new Council of Wizards for your realm. This is not a position to take lightly. If you agree to it, everything that you are and believe will change. As the ruling Council of Wizards you will answer to no mortal. You will have to break your allegiance to your Empire, your families, and everyone else. You will stand alone with only each other to depend on. This is important to ensure that

the Council can act always in the best interest of the entire realm, and not just those of one political group.

“A Council of Wizards has three primary objectives. First and foremost is to prevent the sorcerers from ever getting a foothold in your realm. Should they ever get a foothold, you must do everything in your power to remove them. Second, you need to master all aspects of magic, not just each of your specialties. Finally, you must maintain absolute authority and power over all forms and uses of magic in your realm. To accomplish all this you will eventually need to raise an army of wizards, and appoint them to control sections of your realm, with wizards in training under them as their replacements. We can provide you with the details of how we worked all that out here. That will get you started, but you will probably need to tailor it to your realm. The result of this will be to force the sorcerers into a war on two fronts and give both of us the edge we need to win safety for both our realms. If you should all accept our proposal, I will appoint Vydor as grandmaster of the Council, in keeping with the ranks you have already established.” He paused and looked around the room. No one said anything, as we were trying to digest what he had said.

Then he looked at me and said, “Vydor, you have already surpassed the others with the little bit of power you have learned to use. You see, each of you has all the powers of the others, and more. You just need proper training to unlock them.” He stopped there and looked like he was waiting for a reply.

“All this assumes they do not find this weapon they are looking for,” I said.

“Of course both our forces will have to search constantly for that, too. If it is what they think it is, then whoever finds it wins the war.” He paused there and then continued, “It also assumes that each of you has a strong moral core which extends well beyond our primary objectives. You must all swear to strive to do good in every way, without counting the cost. Based on what I know of each of you I am not concerned about this, but it must be said.”

“What if they have the same idea and plant a Council of Sorcerers?” I asked.

“Then we risk them raising a second army of sorcerers, which would force us back into a stalemate, this time with both our realms devastated by the war. That is why they must never get a permanent foothold in your realm. The lives of everyone in your realm and ours depend on your preventing that,” was his reply.

“Assuming that we accept this burden, how do we get back there, and what will our first move be?” I asked.

“The plan is simple. Right now the sorcerers think you are all dead. We will wait for the planet to be destroyed by your armies, which I consider a most devious plan! They have no idea that it is coming because they do not consider floating rocks to be a threat. The confusion of the forced rapid withdrawal, and the devastation to their number caused by it will give us an opportunity to slip you back into your realm unnoticed,” was his response. “After that you must work to build your own power quickly while trying to find out what you can about this weapon they seek. As yet, you lack the skill to combat them, so you must avoid any direct confrontation until you have sufficient knowledge to put up a fight. This may mean letting them take over another planet and getting a small foothold. I know that contradicts what I have already said, but we have to face reality. If you met them in a direct fight now, you would all be killed, and that would hand the realm over to them.” He stood and looked around the room again, then continued, “Now I know I have given you a lot of information to consider. I will leave you to talk about it alone.” He pulled a small bell out of another hidden pocket and said, “Ring this bell when you are ready for me to return. Until then you are safe here. Rest, eat, and think.” With that he left the room.

I could tell no one was really sure what to do next, so I reached out mentally to the others and said, “*Everyone, eat and get some sleep. I do not want anyone to talk about this right now. Each of you must think about what we have been told. We will meet back around this table in twelve hours. At that time we will discuss this idea fully and freely without regard to rank. When Kellyn wakes, I will brief her on what has transpired while she rested.*”

Chapter Eighteen

I stood and walked back to where Kellyn was sleeping. I moved my bed next to hers in such a way that no one could get to her without waking me first. Then I climbed into bed and began to integrate all the new information I had into the weave that I had started when this mission began. That seemed like a lifetime ago now. I slowly slipped deeper and deeper into my thoughts, and lost all connection with the outside world.

The problem with all this new information was that no matter what happened now, I could never go back to just being Commander Vydor. That life, that once held so much promise for a shining career in the Imperial Navy, had ended. Indeed, what I had learned and experienced during this mission had shattered many of the beliefs I had held since childhood. The cover-up about the planet, the imprisonment of the Black Adders, the memory blocks - all that I had learned along the way had severely damaged my view of the benevolence, infallibility and power of the Empire and the Emperor. In fact, they look rather weak and helpless in the face of this new threat.

I do not know how long I lay like that pondering all that I had learned, but I was awakened by a touch to my face. Without opening my eyes I reached out mentally and found Kellyn kneeling next to my bed. I silently said, *"Good morning. Sleep well?"*

She mentally gasped a bit, and then responded, *"Sir, I am sorry to disturb you, but I was worried about you. You looked so lifeless."*

"It is okay, Kellyn. I have a lot to tell you about what happened while you were asleep, but before I do I want to ask you something. What did you mean about the demon?" I asked.

"Sir, I saw a dark spirit chasing you; he is a very old and powerful spirit. I know that he has hunted your entire family line. He will do anything to destroy you. When you were wounded back at the gate the wound was not too bad. Your armor stopped most of the blast, but it weakened you briefly, and that was enough for the spirit to attack. I do not know how you survived as long as you did under his attack, but you were seconds from death when I finally reached you." She paused to gather herself, then said, *"Sir, I do not yet have the power to beat that demon, but I have forced him to retreat for now. I will one day gain the strength to defeat him, and until then together we can hold him back."*

While she talked I found myself drawn to her. Beyond the outer layer of thought that we used to communicate, she opened herself completely to me. I saw down into her core, her inner being. First I saw a bright and pure light, almost blinding, but beyond that was the most surprising thing. She had at her very core a fierce fire that could outshine a million stars. I knew in my heart the meaning of what I saw. I knew that she was pure at heart, and that nothing would sway her from my side.

I gasped as I made this realization and felt her say to me, *"I know all that is in you, and what is in you is not the demon, but a good soul that is being suppressed by anger, fear and pain. Now you also know me through and through. I will go with you as you fight to free your soul and defeat this demon that stalks you. Together we will be victorious."*

"Kellyn, I hardly know how to reply to that ... "thank you" hardly seems enough ..." I just trailed off, not knowing how to respond, but this was not normal speech. This was the world of thought and emotion. She did not need my words to know how I felt; she could read my mixture of surprise, relief and joy for herself.

"It is okay, Vydor, I already know," was her reply. Her tone had shifted. It was more informal, more intimate. I felt a bond grow between us that I had never had with anyone before.

"Well, I had better fill you in on what happened. Let me see if I can repeat Darnath's feat of passing on a memory ..." I pictured my mind as a big library with lots of books, each book representing a different memory. I took up the books that contained all the memories from when I had seen Kellyn pass through the gate until my recent awakening. I then pictured myself handing her the books, which she took and opened. Suddenly we were both reliving all the events, including my vision and fight in the gateway, which I had forgotten until now.

Once that was done she said with a tone of humility, *“Vydor, I would be honored to serve on your Council of Wizards.”* How did she do that? I had not yet realized that I had made up my mind, and here she was responding to a question I had not yet asked! I realized that she was right. At some point along the way I had decided to accept the position of grandmaster wizard.

“Vydor, even if the others decide not to come along, I will be with you and I am sure we will eventually find five more people to make up the council, but I believe that they will all join us,” she said with a high degree of certainty.

I rose then without breaking my link to Kellyn; it brought me a sense of peace that I was not willing to give up. I looked around the room and saw the rest of the team already at the table. Kellyn and I walked over and took the remaining two seats. After getting some food I connected with the rest of them, keeping my connection to Kellyn separate and secret, and asked, *“I have no idea what time it is, but is everyone ready to discuss Mantis’ suggestion?”*

“I think so, sir,” started Jerran. *“Is Kellyn up to speed?”*

“Yes, sir, fully so,” she replied.

“Well, sir, I did not get much rest, and I suspect the others didn’t either. It seems to me that there are only two options here. We can say no to Mantis’ plan and offer of assistance, go back to our realm and fight them alone, or we can accept his help and follow his plan. The reality is that the sorcerers are not going to go away; in fact, now that they think we are dead they are likely to move forward with whatever their plans are,” said Major Jerran.

“Sir, on the surface it seems like an easy decision. Why fight alone when you have all this power here to call on for help? But the problem is all the strings attached to that,” said Gafar.

“I see it a bit differently, sir,” started Darnath. *“The way I see it is that Mantis’ plans will move forward, with or without us. They cannot risk our realm falling to their enemy. That would give the sorcerers a safe place to build a second army, which would spell the end for the wizards. War has come upon the Empire, and it’s a war the Empire cannot win alone. We can either stand and fight or watch others fight for us.”*

After that others piped in with their views, and soon the discussion got repetitive with no real progress being made. During all this time that box sat on the table staring at us, daring us to make a decision. After some time, I stood and waited for the conversation to stop. I raised my hand and mentally reached out and opened the box. I could feel the surprise from everyone around me, especially as I lifted the seven rings out of the box and moved them towards each person, resting them on the table in front of them. I said, *“The choice before us is simple. We either stand and fight the sorcerers, or we fold and hope for the best.”* I took one of the rings, slipped it on my hand and said, *“I never fold.”*

Kellyn then scooped up a ring and put it on her finger, saying, *“I stand with you, Vydor.”*

There was a pause while the other five stared at the rings but then, one by one, they each picked up a ring and slipped it on, saying, *“I am a Black Adder, and we never back down. I stand with Vydor and the Council.”*

As the last ring was placed on the last finger, I felt a change in the room. The order of events was not clear to me, but our uniforms all became dark robes, and the staves we all carried were exchanged for others that looked like the one Mantis wielded. Our bodies felt different, too; I could not place the feeling and no one else could either, but we were definitely different.

Once all that had passed I rang the bell to let Mantis know that we had made our decision. I was sure the sound had not yet reached the door when he opened it and entered.

“I see you have made your decision, and I must say I am glad at the choice you’ve made,” he said as he walked over to a small table in the corner that I had not noticed before. He took from his robes an impossibly large hourglass and set it on the table. Purple sand slowly dripped down as it counted out the seconds. *“This timer will run out at the same time the first rocks hit the colony. When that happens I will bring you back to the gate you used to get here and send you back to your realm.”* He walked over to a section of wall and waved his hand over it. As he did so the wall disappeared, revealing another room. We followed him into that room where walls and walls of books greeted us.

“Here is my personal library. Study what you can while you are here, and before you leave I will copy some of the more important texts for you to take to start your own library. I suggest you start by learning the spell of many tongues so that you can read any of the books, but you are welcome to start wherever you please.” With that he left.

Looking around the room I was a bit overwhelmed by all the books. *“Well, I really did not get much sleep during our break. I spent it all in thought, so I am going to lie down and deal with this later,”* I said, heading back to my bed. The others made similar comments and left the room, but Kellyn was undaunted. She walked over to the stack of books and said, *“I think I have slept enough for today. I will see what I can find in here.”*

Chapter Nineteen

I fell asleep so quickly that I am not sure my head even reached the pillow before I was out. When I awoke later I saw Darnath, Gafar and Andreyra eating quietly at the table that never seemed to run out of food. Luke and Jerran were still asleep. I poured a drink and headed into the other room to find Kellyn poring over a book.

Immediately I felt her reach out to me and say, *“Morning, Vydor. I have something for you.”* She mentally pulled a scroll from her memories and handed it to me. When I opened it to read I was transported back to earlier in the day and saw myself leave the room. Then I, as Kellyn, walked over to the bookcase and started taking down books at random. None of them made any sense. They were all filled with strange writing, and many had odd illustrations that did not make sense without the text. After a while I found a book with writing on its side that I could read. I pulled it down and saw that it was entitled “A Wizard’s Primer.” I took the book over to a large reading table and opened it at the first chapter, which was entitled “The Spell of Many Tongues.”

After studying this spell I took another book off the shelf and attempted to read it, using the spell. Success! After casting the spell I could read any of the books I pulled down.

The memory ended there. So I lifted a book off the shelf, attempted the spell I had just learned, and it worked. I could read all the books on the shelf. *“Where is the primer now?”* I asked Kellyn.

“Here,” she said and handed me a book from her stack, barely looking up from her studies. *“I am finished with it.”*

I spent the next few hours studying that book until Darnath and the others finally wandered in. I handed them the book and told them all about the first spell. We all spent what we assumed to be the rest of the day in there studying. With no windows it was hard to guess the time. Eventually we took a break from our studies to eat a meal together.

Talking with them now as Magi, I noticed that we had all shifted to a more casual tone, and any thought of rank was almost completely gone. I was pleased to see this because I knew from experience that all those formal ranks and rules just got in the way of getting things done.

At first the talk was mostly about what we had learned. Other than the primer book, we were each reading out of different books and learning about different things. Kellyn studied all the books she could find on spirits, demons, and magical healing while Darnath was more interested in spells regarding shields, protection and hiding. Jerran seemed to favor spells dealing with fire, explosion, and the like. Gafar and Luke were working very closely together studying natural and weather magic, while Andreyra stayed focused on illusionary magic. My interests lay much more in how magic worked, and what its origins were.

“When we get back I suppose the first thing we must do is resign,” Darnath said, which seemed to silence all communication.

“Yes, that would be best,” I responded. *“Officially we are all dead now, so I am not sure of the best way for you to do that. For me it is easy. I have to go to my former captain and officially announce my resignation, but you all ... can you even resign when you are sent to a quarantine colony like that?”*

“Well, I’m not sure. None of us volunteered for the position, nor does our status officially exist,” said Darnath thoughtfully.

“This is what we will do, then. When we get back we will travel to High Command, and we will inform them that we are leaving the military. It is likely that no one will be happy with this, and we will be seen as traitors, but in time that will pass,” I said.

“Aye, but it could be worse. Being what we are, they might try to imprison us,” interjected Gafar.

“Well, we will deal with that if it comes up. All we need now is to make sure we have a good escape plan from any meeting. Has anyone studied the art of teleportation yet?” I asked. They all shook their heads. *“Jerran, please make it a point to find a book on that. Gafar, find out what you can*

about gate travel. I suspect we will need to learn both before we leave. Andrey, please see what you can learn about opening a window to look at places like Mantis did, and any other monitoring means you can find. It is important that no two of us learn the same thing. We can exchange memories later. For the moment we need to maximize the time we have in this library. Darnath, go on with what you are studying, we will need that for sure. Kellyn, you are on a good track already, too. Luke, please find out what you can about summoning creatures to help us. Surely the wizards have something other than the foul beasts the sorcerers use. I will see what I can learn about crafting wands, staves, and other magical tools, as we will need to know how to make our own. Study what you can, but make sure you get good rest and nourishment. It could be a long time before we enjoy safety like this again. As silly as this sounds, take it slow and easy, but study as much and as fast as you can.” I smiled at that. They indicated they understood what I meant. One by one they finished their meals and entered the library.

Chapter Twenty

The rest of our time there passed with little of note occurring. We ended up splitting our time between studying and trading memories of what we learned. This constant exchange of memories helped draw us much closer as a team than ever before. Soon, though, the purple sands of time began to run out, and Mantis returned to speak with us.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed your little rest. As we speak the first of the rocks is closing in on the colony. Your crewmates did well. In this first wave at least six large rocks will hit in rapid succession, with three more waves on the way. When all is done, well over fifty large rocks will hit that world. The sorcerers are just now realizing their error and, since their gate is not yet repaired, most will not make it off the planet. The elite and higher level of their number can travel without the gate, but the rest will perish. This will be their biggest single loss in a century. That would be an impressive feat for an army of wizards; it is completely unthinkable for an army of mundanes!” Mantis said with obvious astonishment.

“I take it then my message got through to the fleet,” I said.

“Yes, it did,” said Mantis. “You are probably wondering how we kept tabs on you while you were on the colony since you spent most of the time hiding. Well, the truth is we have spies on the Dragon Claw and in the sorcerers’ forces that kept us advised of everything, and between the two we were able to piece together what was going on down there. We also discovered that the Dark Talon never returned to the fleet.” He stopped there and hesitated, but then continued, “Since we had intercepted your communications to the Dark Talon, we were able to recreate your commands and contacted the ship. Yesterday it was still in orbit around the planet, so we sent it away from the area to a safer location. Our plan is to put you on to the Dark Talon when we return you to your realm.”

“Will you reveal who your spies are?” I asked. “Since we will not be part of the Imperial Navy any more, we would find such a source of information helpful.”

“Well, we could but it wouldn’t do you any good. You see, the spies do not know who they are. We have simply found some people in key positions who are very susceptible to our mind-reading. I assure you they have no idea they are helping us,” was his answer.

I was relieved to hear that. I would hate to think I had promoted or rewarded someone who was a traitor. “Well, yes, we would still like to know so that we, too, can monitor them if need be.” I really had no intention of doing that, but it would be good to know who was being used and who was not in case our friendship with this other council ever got rocky.

“*That’s brilliant, Vydor!*” I heard Kellyn say via our connection. We had grown much closer over the past few days and maintained a more or less permanent telepathic link which was separate and deeper than that with the rest of the group.

“Certainly. I will include a list with the books when I finish collecting the copies I’ve had made for you. Now you need to get yourselves ready. In one hour I will be sending you back to your realm,” Mantis said.

“Mantis, once we are there, how will we reach you for future communication?” I asked.

“In one of the books I am giving you there is information on how to create and use a communication sphere. You will be able to use that to communicate with anyone else who has a sphere, no matter where they are, including me.” He turned and left the room promptly again. He seemed to have no use for goodbyes.

“*Well, I guess it’s time to pack up,*” I said and looked at the small amount of gear I had left. That was when I found the book again. I had forgotten about it because of everything that had happened and, now that I could read it, there was no time to do so. I pulled it out anyway and looked at the cover. The title on it was simple and bold; it merely said, “The Book.”

“*Vydor, you must tell me the story behind this book of yours soon. It looks very intriguing,*” commented Kellyn. She could sense the feeling of wonderment I had about the book and knew it was special.

I packed the book away and replied, *"It was my last gift from my father before he died."*

"Ah, then we must keep it safe always."

Once we had all our gear packed, we sat down for one last meal at the table, which had still not run out of food or drink.

"I guess one of us should have learned how this table works," mused Luke. This brought a chuckle from all of us.

We ate mostly in silence until Mantis returned. When he entered the room, he simply said, "It is time," and walked out. We followed him and he led us back to the gate room. A feeling of fear passed over me as I recalled the last time I had gone through that gate, and I felt Kellyn come up beside me in support.

Mantis approached the gate and waved his arms over it while chanting in an arcane tongue. Soon a small, blue spiral appeared in the center and grew to fill the gate. "It is ready," was all he said as he pushed a big chest through it.

"Goodbye, Mantis, and thank you," I said and walked up to the gate. As the leader, I felt I should be the first to brave the gate, but Kellyn would not let me go alone. So we both went through. In the gateway I saw him again, the dark specter, patiently watching and waiting as if all of time was on his side. I also saw the being of light, this time much closer than he had ever been before, but still with his arms wide as if to say, "Come to me."

I could still feel Kellyn beside me as we traveled through the gate, and I knew she could see all that I could see because I could see all that she saw. In her vision there was no dark specter, and the being of light was much closer. *"What are they?"* I wondered.

Before she could attempt an answer we were standing on the Dark Talon, and soon after the rest of the Council came through. I went to the bridge and activated the viewing screen to see what was happening. We were a safe distance from the planet, but well within range of the ship's cameras. From the looks of things the first wave of rocks had already landed, and the second wave was about to hit. We all stood there and looked in awe at the death of the planet. The surface was completely molten by the end of the attack. Nothing could have survived it.

"I guess it's a bit late to ask if I can go back and get my comic books?" asked Luke.

The total irrelevance of that question nearly killed us all with laughter. Eventually we recovered, and I took my seat of command. The ship could fly mostly automated as long as we did not have to fight anyone. I set a course back to the Dragon Claw.

"I plan to return to the fleet. The trip back to the capital will be much faster if we ride with them, but this ship can take us if it needs to," I said.

"Vydor, I suggest you try to contact them first. As I recall, the standard procedure is to destroy any ships in the system after a bombardment," commented Jerran.

"Good point," I said. I activated the ship's communication equipment and opened a secure channel to the fleet.

"Dragon Claw, this is Dark Talon reporting in, authorization code Kelly-Red-Igloo-Sam-Theta-Igloo, do you read me?" was the message I sent. I set it on repeat and waited for a reply.

"Dark Talon, this is the captain. What is your status?" came the reply. I checked all the reply codes and the message looked legit.

"Captain, the Dark Talon appears to be intact, but only seven of us made it off the planet, myself and six of the Black Adders. Sir, I would like the record to show that the Dark Knights fought to the death in order to give me a chance to get our information out to you. I would also like the record to show that I used my battlefield authority to grant the Black Adders each a Medal of Honor for their valor in combat against the enemies of the Empire, who we now know call themselves sorcerers." I needed to get that on the record before I resigned so that it would stick.

"Record duly noted and accepted. How long before you can reach the fleet?" the captain asked.

"Sir, without a navigator to calculate a jump it will take several days, if not a week. Can you send the jump algorithms for the autopilot?" I asked.

“Affirmative, Vydor. I will get someone to send it to you on this channel soon. Once you return we will need a complete debriefing before I can assign you back to your post.”

“Sir, we will be glad to comply with that, but hold off on any reassignments for now. Captain, this sounds odd, I understand, but we have information that must reach High Command in person. I received special orders directly from the Emperor’s office before I left for the mission, and I must ask you to take us back to the capital right away. If you cannot, then I will need you to send the jump algorithms to the Dark Talon to take us back.”

“Well, normally that would cause a problem, but we already have orders to return to the capital, so there will be no difficulty there. Since you are still operating under orders from them, I will not be able to return you to your position as yet. I look forward to your return, Vydor. I am sure you have much to tell. Dragon Claw out.”

With that the transmission ended. Not long later the jump data came in, and I entered it into the navigation system. I looked over my team and could tell that everyone was nervous. *“Remember, should this plan fail, we will have no option but to steal the Dark Talon and escape. Darnath, make sure that no one can enter or interfere with her at all while we are away. If you have any questions, this is probably your last chance to ask them,”* I said.

No one said anything. I knew they were worried about our situation. It should not have been like this; after all, we were going home, but I felt it too. It was not really home any more. *“Okay, the jump is laid in. Buckle yourselves in,”* I ordered.

“Kellyn, I will need you to watch over me during the jump. I will be meditating in order to avoid the post-jump hangover just in case the jump algorithms are off,” I said to Kellyn privately. Jump calculations were notoriously tricky, and we would come out of the jump extremely close to the gravity wake of the fleet. Even a minor error could be deadly, so I wanted to be ready to take control of the ship the instant we came out of the jump.

Kellyn slid into the chair next to mine and grabbed my arm so that we would be one physical unit in jump space. Once everyone appeared to be ready I called out, *“Jumping in three ... two ... one.”* As I said the last number, I dropped into a meditative state. The next thing I heard was the ship’s alarms going off as we came out of the jump. We were on a collision course with the Dragon Claw! I quickly steered us to safety and brought the ship out of stealth mode.

“Vydor, the specter merely watched patiently, as if to say, ‘I have plenty of time. I’ll catch you unguarded one day ...’ and did not attack,” said Kellyn privately to me.

“Thank you, Kellyn,” was my response.

“Dark Talon, this is Bay Control on the Dragon Claw. Come about to 284.78 degrees and engage the autopilot. We will bring you into bay Five-E,” came a message over the communicator.

I did as they said then replied, “Acknowledged. You should have control now.”

“Affirmative, enjoy the ride.”

“Five-E, that’s not good,” I commented.

“What is wrong with Five-E?” asked Gafar.

“Well, that is where they send you if they think you are carrying a contagious disease, so that means we will have to go through quarantine and disinfection,” was my reply.

“Well, that could work in our favor. The best option for us right now is to keep silent until we get to High Command, and if we are stuck in quarantine for a while, that would be much easier to pull off,” noted Darnath.

I smiled. He was right; this could not play out any better. Only the captain and Dr. Rannor would come to see us there. *“Plus it gives us an excuse to lock the ship,”* I said. *“If I recall right, since we were on a non-Imperial world for a while we will have to be kept in quarantine for forty-eight hours, but it is at least a week to the capital from here. I will have to see if I can pull some strings and keep us in there longer. No matter what happens, your cover story is that I am operating under command from the Emperor’s office and I have ordered you not to talk to anyone about the mission, the colony, the Magi, or anything related until we are properly debriefed by the High Command. Also*

do not forget that Larath is on this ship, so do not let your guard down, as we do not yet know the extent of his power or what role he is playing in this.”

Security forces poured into the bay once the ship was safely secured. They were all wearing biohazard gear, but only carrying ceremonial weapons. They lined up along the path we would have to walk to get to the decontamination area and snapped to attention. *“A hero’s welcome home,”* I said. That was a very good sign.

“Dark Talon, this is Bay Control. You are cleared to disembark from your vessel and proceed to Decon room seven,” came a voice over the speakers.

“Bay Control, this is Dark Talon. We will be establishing a quarantine field around the Dark Talon until further notice. Keep all personnel and gear at least ten meters away,” I replied.

“Acknowledged,” came the reply.

“Okay, it is time. Follow me out,” I said as I opened the airlocks. The Dark Talon automatically lowered a ramp for us to walk down. Kellyn came down at my side, and the others followed, with Darnath bringing up the rear. As soon as everyone was clear, I signaled the Dark Talon to lock itself up, and I saw Darnath erect an energy field around it.

As we walked through the corridor formed by my old security forces they snapped a stiff salute, and the Imperial Anthem played over the bay’s speakers. As we reached the end of the line I saw my replacement standing there with a look of pride on his face, as if to say, “I knew you could do it!” I gave him a smile and a slight nod as I passed. I knew that I was leaving the fleet in good hands with him.

Next we passed down a corridor and all pretense of honor was gone as we had to walk through various clouds of chemicals, sprays and irradiation chambers all designed to kill everything but us. Once we finished that walk we entered a small, square room with just enough space for seven beds, a few tables and a bathroom. At each table was a computer workstation, in case we felt the motivation to get right to work.

“Well, pick your bed and relax as best you can until we hear from someone. Speak freely, but only via our telepathic connections. Say as little as possible verbally,” I ordered.

Chapter Twenty-One

Two hours passed with no outside contact from anyone until the captain arrived. One wall of the room was transparent, allowing easy communication with anyone in a sitting room which was connected but secured from any chance of contamination. The captain's large frame made the visitors' room look like a child's playhouse. He walked close enough to see through the wall and waited. I got up from the table where I was sitting and stood before him, not precisely at attention, but enough to convey respect.

"Welcome home, Vydor," he said. "And welcome aboard to your squad."

"Thank you, sir," I replied.

"What happened to your uniforms?"

"Well, when we left the planet three or four days ago, we had to hide out amongst the natives of the world we were on so we are dressed as they dress."

"What planet, and why were you hiding?"

"Sir, I am not able to tell you much, at least not before my debriefing by High Command, but there are some things you need to know. The first thing is that war has come to the Empire, and the new enemy wields weapons of vast power. Sir, understand that what I am about to tell you for the most part you will probably never have clearance to know, but you will be on the front line of this war so I am going to break some rules."

"Go on."

"Captain, what we were calling the Magi when I left here are an alien race, a very hostile alien race. They came here looking for something. What they were looking for we do not yet know, but what we do know is that they chose this colony to attack because the Black Adders were there. They saw them as the only threat to their eventual takeover of the Empire. I hope you got my report from the field about how easily they beat Lieutenant Tom's forces and faked the distress call?"

"Yes, we did. Some of that footage was very troubling, especially your dogfight with nothing in orbit."

"Yes, that it was. Think about this scenario for a moment: the sorcerers turn both their fear weapon and their hallucination weapon on the fleet at the same time. They make everyone very afraid and then make them think they are surrounded by enemies..."

"It would be a bloodbath. We have already played that out, and a dozen other possibilities. None of them looks good."

"Well, we know now you can add superior defenses, firepower and mobility to their advantages."

"I take it that shield around the Dark Talon is something you acquired from them?"

"No, not exactly, but it is something they can do, too. Let me fill you in on the broad events that happened after those logs ended. The Dark Knights and I were pinned down in a tight corridor, unable to make much of a dent in the forces brought against us. They stood and held the position and our enemy at bay long enough for me to escape the death trap, with the help of the Black Adders who showed up to help, but before any of them could follow me the sorcerers brought out heavy weapons and broke through our shield walls, completely devastating the squad. The Black Adders and I then pushed on to send what data I had to you, all the while staying just out of reach of the sorcerers' patrols. We knew that they had an escape route off the planet, so we knew we had to destroy that before they realized the peril they were in. They use a gate to travel through, and once we learned how to operate it we laced it with explosives and used it to escape. Just as we were leaving they found us and opened fire on our unshielded position, and they thought they had succeeded in killing us before we escaped. That is why we had to hide out; we had to let them think they had won so that they would not rush to build a new gate. You see, your bombardment attack exploited a big weakness in their defenses; they can only scan for living things. That is why only the Imperial sensors that were on the colony detected the probes. By the time those sensors could have seen the rocks it would have been

much too late to raise a defense. We do not have exact numbers, but we do know that you scored a crippling blow on their ability to make war in this realm. They will have to reorganize and redeploy before they can attack again. We do not know how long that will take, but I do know that once they find out we are still alive we will be their first target.”

“So you hid out on this other planet somewhere for a few days. How did you get back?”

“We used one of their gates.”

“What are these gates?”

“Well, they appear to work similarly to a jump drive, except that you do not need a ship or large mass, just a big ring of stone planted in a wall. When the gate is activated it looks like a swirling blue light, and when you enter it, it is like being in jump space, but with absolutely no physical matter. I really do not have much more information on them.”

“Vydor, you have changed a lot.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Well, when you left here you were a kid. You talked big but had nothing to back it up. Now I see why Dr. Rannor recommended you so highly. When the challenge came you rose to meet it and became a warrior worthy of my senior staff.”

“Thank you for your kind words, but I do not think I will be returning to your senior staff. Sir, please understand that I fully expect it to go poorly when we meet High Command, and it is a given that I will never wear the uniform again.”

“Vydor, you are more than any uniform, and only a fool thinks High Command has a clue about real officers in the field. No matter what happens at that debriefing you will have an ally in me.”

“Captain, I greatly appreciate that, and I may have to hold you to that promise. A lot of things will change after I meet with them, and you may be required to publicly denounce me. I just want you to know now that we will be fine, and we do not want you to take a fall for us.”

“When we got that message from you, we all thought that would be the last we heard from you. All of us except Peter, that is. He said at the time, ‘Vydor always plans a way out in advance. He will make it yet.’ Seems that he knew you better than we did.”

“Captain, Lieutenant Commander Peter is the best possible replacement for me; please make his position permanent as soon as you can.”

He laughed and said, “Of course. You know, it is funny how things work out. He was the one I wanted in your position before Dr. Rannor convinced me to take you.”

The door opened behind him and Dr. Rannor walked in. “Captain, I need to talk to them alone if you don’t mind.”

“That does not sound good, Doc,” the captain said as he left.

Dr. Rannor stood there for a moment without speaking, seeming to visually examine each of us. It was a tense silence and I was unsure of what to expect. He was wearing his traditional white lab coat and holding a medical pad that presumably had our charts on it.

Eventually he turned to me and said, “Vydor, how long do you need?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, you have some odd bacteria on you that resisted the decontamination treatment. It could be harmless but there is no way to know without watching it for a while,” he said. There was something about his voice, something that told me he knew that we would be better off spending our trip in here and he was offering to arrange that.

“Well, that sounds only prudent and if we had to stay in here until we were to report to High Command’s chambers, that would be fine with us. We would not want to endanger anyone needlessly,” was my reply.

“I think we can arrange to have you out in time for that. It is good to see you again, and we will have to catch up some day when you are not so penned up.”

I realized then what the good doctor was up to. He was warning me that our conversation was being monitored. “Yes it will, Doc.”

He gave a slight smile and left the room.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next few days passed painfully slowly. All our books were still on the Dark Talon, and even if we had had them with us we dared not study them while under observation. On the third day of our captivity Zalith came to visit.

He entered the room and came straight to the transparent wall, locking his steel-like gaze directly on me. "Vydor, I need you to lower the screen on the Dark Talon."

"Sorry, Zalith, I cannot do that," I replied and matched his gaze.

"Vydor, forget your orders for a minute. On that ship are some personal effects from the fallen Knights and I would like to get them back to their families."

Personal effects? The Dark Knights? I could not believe it. Still, I could not let him on that ship, not with all that we had stored there. "When I am permitted to return to the vessel I will be glad to retrieve them for you, but I cannot let anyone but us seven on that vessel, at least not until after High Command rules on it." I was bluffing far too much with this High Command orders card. I just hoped I could keep it up long enough to speak before them.

He was not at all happy with that response. I do not think he expected me to stand up to him and say no. His nostrils flared and he bared his razor-like teeth slightly. I held my ground and did not flinch, but secretly I worried that the wall would not be able to hold him back.

I decided to try and defuse the situation, "Zalith, I suggest you go find Dr. Rannor and ask him to set up a decontamination tunnel so that I can return to the ship and retrieve what you want."

With a slight growl, he swiftly spun and left the room.

"Well, he certainly is one of your friendlier crewmates," commented Luke. "*I bet he is a blast at parties.*"

I could not help but chuckle at him. He was really developing a habit for saying the silliest things at the oddest times. I was just glad he had not said that aloud. I did not think others would find it humorous.

"*I fear he could be our biggest obstacle on this ship. He wants the Dark Talon back, but until we can find a replacement for it, we cannot let him have it. It is our only base right now.*"

Soon after that Larath came by. I was expecting this visit sooner or later. He was dressed in casual attire, like he always was when he was going to evaluate someone and did not want to let on. This had potential to be a very dangerous meeting as he would surely detect the changes in me, but I was glad for the chance to finally determine how much power he had. "*Gafar, do not get caught but learn what you can about him,*" I said. "*I will try to keep his focus on me.*"

"Okay," replied Gafar.

"Greetings, Vydor. I am sorry I was not able to see you off properly," he said warmly.

I could feel him trying to read me, so I returned the favor and reached out and gently prodded, trying to do nothing more than distract him. I was counting on Gafar to do the real probing.

"Hello, Larath. I am glad you finally came to visit," I said.

"I see you did not need my lessons after all."

"No, I had to learn them the hard way, but I managed."

"Perhaps after all this is done we can trade notes," he commented.

It was time to risk tipping my hand a bit to see if I could flush anything out. "Larath, I had been meaning to ask but never had the time: how did you come up with the name 'Magi'?" That sent a ripple through his psychic defenses. I had definitely stumbled onto something.

"Oh, it is just a name from an old story. Nothing special."

"Really? What story is that?"

"Just a childhood tale, nothing worthy of note. You and your team have been very quiet since your return. Is everything all right?"

It was an interesting subject change. I had hit on something there, but I dared not push it yet. "Just recovering from the stress of combat, each in their own way."

“Why don’t you tell me a little about that?”

“Larath, you never stop trying to do your job, do you?”

“Vydor, how does that make you feel?” he said with a big grin.

“Like laughing at you,” I said with a chuckle.

“Ah, that’s a good reaction; I will have to note that in your record.”

“Larath, are you to deliver your report on us before or after we present ours?”

“Neither, I will be with you when you report,” he said and promptly left.

“Gafar, give me some good news,” I said.

“Vydor, I cannot. But if you want bad news, I have plenty.”

“Well, then, give me that.”

“Larath is an apprentice-level sorcerer.”

I almost fell over when he said that. Of all the things I expected to hear, that was not one of them. “That is not at all good.”

“No, and it gets worse. He is only one of five sorcerers in consular positions in the Empire.”

“You have to admire how clever that is. That gets them unrestricted access to just about everyone. Can you tell if there are others?”

“No, Vydor, he knows of no others.”

“We cannot let him attend our debriefing with the High Command. The question is how do we stop it without tipping our hand?”

“Vydor, I have some more bad news. He recognized the rings on our fingers.”

“Then it is too late to consider anything hidden. Our enemy knows we are alive and what we are up to. Our first mission will be to eliminate their five spies.”

“Why didn’t Larath warn the sorcerers about the bombardment?” Kellyn wondered.

“That is a very good question, Kellyn,” I said.

We spent the next few days just waiting. There was not much else to do. I spent most of the time working all the new information we had back into the weave of knowledge I was making. Knowing Larath was a spy answered quite a few of the mysteries going back to the early days of the mission. Things were finally starting to make some sense, and for that I was greatly thankful.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A week after we returned, Dr. Rannor and the captain came back into the visitor's room. They both looked a bit tired and concerned. I could sense they were worried about my meeting with High Command. For the first time I realized they did not trust or respect High Command and the Emperor nearly as much as I had when I first came on board.

"It is time," was all Dr. Rannor said before he opened the seal to our chamber.

"My orders are to put you on the Dark Talon and send you to the capital planet. Once there you will receive new orders. I am also to send Larath with you," said the captain.

"Send Larath ahead of us if you must, but he cannot board the Dark Talon," I said forcefully.

"Vydor, is there something I need to know?" asked the captain.

"Yes, but I cannot tell you here. Do you have a pad I can use?" I asked.

Dr. Rannor found one and gave it to me. I then encoded a message to the captain in the Duck Code explaining what we knew about Larath. "Captain, after we are safely underway and Larath is gone, take this pad to Peter. He will know what to do," I said as I handed the pad to him.

He hid it away in his uniform jacket and then said, "Vydor, I know your orders are to prevent anyone from boarding the ship, but Zalith has requested access. He says you know why."

"Yes I do. Have him meet us in the bay. Now that I can be there and pretend to care about my orders by escorting him, what he wants can be done," I said with a big smirk. Then over our telepathetic net I said, "*Andreya, please make sure to hide all our newly-acquired things before I board with him.*"

"*Will do,*" she replied.

"Captain, I think we are ready," I said.

The captain walked down to the bay with us, but did not say anything until we got there. Then he looked at Dr. Rannor who gave him a slight nod, and said, "Vydor, you and your squad are welcome back on this ship, regardless of anything that happens with the High Command."

"Captain, no matter what happens, I do not see how this can unfold without us being side by side in battle, and sooner rather than later."

He looked me right in the eye, placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "We will win this war, Vydor, together. Until we meet again, good luck and farewell."

Dr. Rannor then approached me, and did something no one had ever done in my entire adult life; he actually hugged me. I did not know how to respond to that, but Kellyn urged me, "*Hug him back,*" so I did. With that he left without saying a word.

We entered the bay, again greeted by an honor guard, but this time without the biohazard suits. Zalith stood near the ship waiting for us. We walked up to him and I could tell he was still not happy with me. On my mental cue Darnath moved forward and lowered the shields around the ship. "*Okay, Andreya, you go in. Everyone else stay here,*" I sent via our link.

"Zalith, I will take you on the ship shortly. Andreya just needs to handle the rest of the security on board," I said.

"Security?" he asked.

"Yes, let's just say that time spent out there on the front line tends to make you more paranoid than a desk job," I replied.

That actually brought a small smile to his face as he said, "Aye, that it does."

"*Okay, Vydor, it is all done. I am on my way out,*" sent Andreya.

"She is finished," I said, moments before Andreya appeared in the doorway. Once she was off the ship Zalith and I boarded. He went straight over to a wall and removed a panel. Behind it was a hidden safe, which he quickly opened and pulled out a box.

"Vydor, I must confess when I first heard that the Dark Knights had been wiped out but you lived, I assumed they died covering your dishonorable retreat. But since then I have done nothing but pore over the information that you sent and watch how you interact with your new squad. You share a

bond with them that only comes from staring down death and winning as a team. I know now why you did not stand and die honorably with the Knights. You had others to protect, and a battle to win. No Zalionian warrior could have accomplished this feat, since they would have blindly died fighting head-on an enemy you beat with smarter tactics. My only regret now is that I never got to see you in action. You truly are a great warrior, no matter what those idiots in High Command end up saying.” After that he just left in his normal, brusque style.

I did not know what to make of him. Some days I was sure he wanted to rip my head off and use it as a soup bowl, and other days I swore he would give his life to protect me. On top of that, now it was obvious he had even less respect for High Command than anyone I had met. I was starting to wonder if any senior officer still believed in the Emperor.

Everyone filed on to the ship and to my surprise they all filled in key positions on the bridge. Darnath was first to speak up, *“Sir, I will take navigation. I spent the last week studying it.”*

Then Luke said, *“Sir, I am a certified pilot, and I spent the last week studying the specs of this vessel, so I will take the pilot’s position.”*

Then Jerran said, *“Sir, I spent the week studying the tactical systems, so I can take that position.”*

I looked back to the other three and Kellyn piped up, *“And we all spent the week studying damage control, and the like. Wasn’t that really a brilliant idea?”* she said with great excitement.

I knew there was no way through conventional means that they could have learned so much so fast, especially about a classified vessel while locked in prison-like confinement. *“Well, I should say something like we must work out some rules for proper use of our powers amongst the mundane, but instead I will say “well done”! We can worry about the rules later. Everyone prepare for departure. Darnath, please work out our jump to the way point, and get that programmed in.”* I then activated the ship-to-ship communications and said, *“Dark Talon requesting permission to depart, flight plan Alpha Beta Charlie Niner.”*

“Dark Talon, we are preparing the bay for your departure. Please stand by,” came the reply.

On the ship’s viewing screen I saw the hanger’s crew and the honor guard filing out of the bay. Once they were clear there was a rush of air on the monitors as the bay depressurized in preparation for opening the outer doors. Next, the magnetic locks released from the ship and Luke took control of the craft. Once the other bay doors were opened we got the call over the radio, *“Dark Talon, you are cleared for departure. We will send you jump algorithms before you clear the wake.”*

“Negative, Bay Control, we do not need the algorithms,” I replied.

There was a pause, then a hesitant, *“Acknowledged. Bay Control out.”*

I smiled. That must have had them really confused.

Luke then expertly flew out of the bay and said, *“We will be clear of the gravity wake in about twenty-seven minutes.”*

“Excellent. Okay, since you are all so well trained in the specs of this ship, get working on disabling all recording devices on this ship. Gafar, see if you can figure out what Zalith took,” I said.

Gafar said, *“Vydor, he took a memory bank. It was tied to the ship’s internal sensors, but primarily used for personal storage.”*

“Personal storage?”

“Yes. Journals, diaries, personal logs, that kind of thing.”

So Zalith was not lying after all. He really was after personal effects. *“We will need to get that replaced, then.”*

“Vydor, are you planning to keep this vessel?” asked Kellyn.

“Yes, we need a base to work out of, and this is a good size for us.”

“How do you plan to get them to give it to us?”

“Well, I plan to steal it.”

“Vydor! That is not a good plan. Whatever happened to the rule about always doing the right thing?”

I sighed, *"You are right, Kellyn. I will request it from High Command, and if they turn me down we will figure out something else. Meanwhile, I may have to appoint you as the official conscience of the Council of Wizards,"* I said with a grin. I was not sure why, but I felt like deciding not to steal the ship was a small victory for us.

I returned to the captain's seat while I waited for us to clear the wake.

"Vydor, before we jumped last time you meditated, and when I finally came out of the post-jump effects I noticed that you were already in control of the ship. Does meditation somehow help you come out of it faster?" asked Andreya.

"Yes, it avoids almost all the impact of the jump. I would have told you but I promised the Dark Knights I would keep it secret," was my answer.

"So this method is not generally known?" asked Kellyn.

"No, it is their secret weapon that gives them a big edge in combat," I said. *"As far as I know they are the only ones ever to figure it out."*

"Well then, we shall all keep their secret," stated Kellyn, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Vydor, we are clear of the wake and can jump when you are ready," said Luke.

"Give a five-second countdown and then jump," I said.

"Jumping in five ... four... three..." was all I heard as I slipped into a trance. The post-jump beep of the computers alerted me to the end of the jump and this time everyone but Kellyn was awake. *"Do not look alive just yet. It would be best if they do not know how fast we can recover,"* I said. I waited until I saw Kellyn come out of the post-jump hangover, and then announced our presence to the planetary defense network.

"Dark Talon, please relinquish control of your craft. We will take you into the meeting point," was the only reply. Their security codes checked out, so I really had no choice but to comply.

"Luke, do as they ordered," I said. Then I responded on the radio, *"Acknowledged."*

Soon the ship was dropped into full stealth mode, and all viewing screens were turned off. They apparently did not want anyone to know where we were going, not even us. *"Do we have access to any sensors?"* I asked.

"No, sir, all controls are offline, and because we are in stealth mode I cannot even probe for someone outside that can see us," responded Darnath.

"Well then, enjoy the ride, I guess." It made sense that they would keep the location of the High Command a secret. I just did not like not being in control. Not one bit.

"Okay, everyone, here is our plan. You are to hide wands on your person, but leave your staves here. I will be carrying mine just in case, and to add to the effect I am going for. When we disembark, everyone is to have their hoods up, and to stand tall and proud. Do all that you can to look as powerful as possible. Show not even the slightest fear or worry. Instead, act like you are in complete control of everything. We want to make a strong statement for our first impression," I said. *"When we walk, I will lead and you follow. Form up double-file behind me. Do not let anyone break our group, and prevent any security measure from seeing you."*

As I finished saying that I felt the ship come to a landing. That was much too fast to be on the planet; we must have been in a station in orbit. I threw up my hood and grabbed my staff. The lights came on in the ship and the systems returned to normal. *"Darnath, see to it that the ship is safe while we are in there. If all goes badly we will return here and fly her home to the Dragon Claw."*

"Dark Talon, please disembark from your vessel now," came the order over the radio.

I waited a full five minutes, and then opened the airlock. I felt Andreya wrap a subtle aura of darkness around us to help create the effect I was looking for. We walked down the ramp. Instead of an honor guard like there had been on the Dragon Claw, we were greeted by heavily-armed and armored security forces. I walked fearlessly up to the head of the squad and said, *"We are ready."* I could tell that shook him a bit.

"Sir, I need to take your staff," he said.

"No, you will not," I said and laced my words with a bit of fear. I hated to manipulate him like that, but I could not risk losing the staff when we would soon be facing Larath.

“Follow me, then,” he said.

We followed him to a high security checkpoint. He stopped to get clearance to enter, but I led everyone right through the security screens without triggering a single alarm. Once clear, I stopped and without looking back waited for him. I could hear them mumbling in shock, as we did not even show on their scanners. After a minute I said, “Corporal, the High Command is waiting.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” he said and resumed leading us down a long corridor. When we reached a large door he headed to the commpad, presumably to request that the door be opened.

I approached the door and cast a minor unlocking spell and then pushed the door open with telekinesis. The guards looked on in shock. From their perspective I merely waved my hand over the door and it opened. We then walked into the chambers and I saw the members of High Command sitting around a U-shaped table. Larath was in the center, as if they were grilling him. When we entered they all stood. Andreyas illusion of power around us was working perfectly; they were on their feet before they remembered who it was that we were. Larath turned to look at me and I immediately reached out to see what he was up to. He sent one last message back to his master: “*He is definitely the one,*” then did all he could to lock down his mind.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The chairman gestured for the others to sit and said, "Welcome, Vydor. We have reviewed all your reports, and heard Larath's testimony about you, but we are a bit baffled as to why you are here. We sent no order for you to come."

"I sent the order," a voice said from behind us. I turned to look and saw the Emperor himself walking in. He was wearing his regal black robes of office, and carrying the scepter of authority in his right hand. He was much older than I had expected but still had a powerful stride and a confidence built on the might of the Empire itself.

"Greetings, Honored One," I said as I made a small formal bow. The rest of my wizards mimicked my bow in perfect unison.

"Sire, I apologize, but I was not informed of this order," said the chairman as he and the others scrambled to their feet.

"That is fine, please remain seated. I want to hear Vydor's report," said the Emperor as he took his seat on the throne.

"*Get shields up on everyone but Larath, especially the Emperor,*" I said to the wizards via our link. "*I am about to tip our hand and things could get ugly.*"

I walked a few steps towards the Emperor and said, "Honored One, I cannot, for a traitor is in our midst." This brought a gasp of surprise from several members of the High Command.

I turned and looked right at Larath, but before I could make my next move he pulled out a wand and yelled, "Your feeble Empire is no match for us!" He then fired three bolts right at the Emperor in rapid succession. The bolts hit Darnath's shield and burst into harmless light.

I moved towards him and he lowered his wand at me. Before he could fire the wand flew out of his hand, thanks to quick thinking by Jerran. As I neared him, my anger over the loss of the Dark Knights welled up. My voice was dripping with venom as I said, "I have a message for you to send to your masters." I saw fear pass over his face just before I swung my staff, battering him in the side of his head with great force. He crumpled to the ground. I picked up his wand and finished him off. It took me a moment to regain my composure, but thanks to Andrey's illusions no one knew.

Before I could say anything, security forces rushed into the room and surrounded all the members of High Command and the Emperor.

"The situation is under control. Dispose of the body, and stand down," ordered the Emperor.

They moved to comply with great precision and speed. Once they were gone, the Emperor said, "Now would you share your report?" I was somewhat surprised at how fast he could move on.

"Sire, I would like to know more first about what just happened," said the chairman.

"I fully expect that to be part of Vydor's report," stated the Emperor.

As was the proper custom, I faced the Emperor directly before speaking. This put my back to where High Command was sitting, which felt a bit rude, but that was not for me to decide, I guess.

"Yes, Honored One. War has come to the Empire from a new quarter. A group of aliens who call themselves sorcerers have already invaded our realm and attempted to set up a base on Arken IV. This attempt was defeated by the combined efforts of the Black Adders and the Dragon Claw's fleet. The sorcerers wield great power, and have already infiltrated our highest ranks with their spies. Larath was one of five known spies in top consular positions throughout the fleet. These positions give them access to sensitive information which no other position in the Empire could give." I paused here to let that sink in a bit. "Larath's attack on the Emperor was uncharacteristically drastic for them, but I blame that on the fact that he was only an apprentice, and relatively inexperienced in his art." Since Larath was so highly respected for his skill, I wanted to make sure I cast him as weak amongst his peers to give a proper respect for the power of our enemy. "Honored One, with your permission I have a visual presentation to better illustrate who our enemy is."

"Proceed, Vydor," said the Emperor with a tone of curiosity.

“Andreya, please show the fleet demonstration,” I said aloud, then across our connection, “*Can you make an illusion of this?*” and sent her a series of mental images.

“*Sure, Vydor, but next time how about a bit more warning?*” was her reply across our connection. “Yes, Master Vydor,” she said aloud with a tone of extreme respect. Our group then spread out into a circle. Jerran helpfully reached out and lowered the room lights a bit as a 3D image of the Dragon Claw’s fleet appeared in the center of the circle, high enough up in the air for all to see.

“Honored One, what you see here is the most powerful arm of the Navy, the Dragon Claw and her fleet,” I said. Then the image shrank a little and off in the distance we saw a small shuttlecraft. “Here is a single, simple shuttle to represent the number of sorcerers needed to completely defeat the Dragon Claw. Now watch how it plays out. Andreya, play it through to its conclusion without stopping.”

“Yes, Master Vydor,” she replied.

The scene that followed brought gasps from all of High Command and a look of worry on the face of the Emperor. What I had Andreya show was the fleet turning on itself, ship against ship, and crewman against crewman. It was a bloodbath, the like of which had never been seen in all of history. When the illusion finished, the lone shuttle was left flying through a graveyard of destroyed ships.

“Honored One, that is what will happen when the sorcerers decide to move in force against the Empire. What you saw there was one of their simpler but devastating attacks. This is not a theory or a guess; they have already used it on us once. It is a combination of a fear weapon and a hallucination weapon. In short, they can turn us against each other completely eliminating any chance for an Imperial victory,” I explained, then over our connection I said, “*Andreya, can you display the invasion of Lieutenant Tom’s forces?*”

“*No, I did not witness it, but I did see the final battle of the Dark Knights. Would that work?*” she asked.

“Yes,” I said with some hesitation. I was not sure I was ready to see that yet, but this was too important to stand in the way. Aloud I said, “Andreya, please show the final battle of the Dark Knights. Just bring up the initial scene and hold it there.”

“Yes, Master Vydor,” was her reply.

Upon hearing her say that it occurred to me that I was not speaking to the Emperor as a lowly soldier, for I was speaking now as an equal, a fellow ruler. The formal title of master which everyone would have to use to me now scared me a little. Instead of executing orders, I would have to give them. The burden of that was starting to weigh on me as I realized that the future of the Empire might depend on my presentation right now.

“What you see before you is the best of the best, the Dark Knights. At the start of this battle there were twenty-five of them, heavily armed and ready for combat. Earlier in our mission we had discovered how to block the fear and hallucination weapon. What you are about to see here is how easily our elite forces were defeated. Andreya, let the scene play out,” I said.

They all watched in horror as the Knights’ weapons proved ineffective against the shields of the sorcerers. I noticed Andreya had left me completely out of it, which I was thankful for since I did not want to distract from my presentation by explaining how I had lived through it. As she got to the end of the battle I saw for the first time how they had died. One of the seven appeared. Unlike the other sorcerers, he stood tall and did not hide behind a shield. Instead, he walked forward, completely immune to all the weapons being brought against him. He casually lowered his staff and fired a single blast. Andreya masterfully shifted the scene so that everyone’s eyes followed the bolt of energy right down to the center of the Dark Knights’ position. The resulting blast ripped a hole right through to the outside atmosphere, sucking any who might have survived out on to the surface of the planet to die. The sorcerers were safe behind a shield wall, but the Greenskins all perished, as they were with the Dark Knights. The scene faded and everyone was silent.

“*Andreya, please bring up an image of that master sorcerer just before he blasted, and nothing else,*” I said via our connection.

“Honored One, the sorcerers break up their forces into seven ranks. They are prospect, student, apprentice, journeyman, elite, master and grandmaster. Each level is exponentially stronger than the previous level. We do not have a count of their total forces but we know there are six master sorcerers and one grandmaster who make up their ruling council. This man here is one of seven known to be on their ruling council. As you saw, his power is far greater than any of the others and he does not care how many of his own troops die, as long as he wins. The hard truth is that the Empire presently has nothing that can stand against him, and he is but one of seven,” I explained.

“Vydor, what about the Black Adders?” he asked.

“Honored One, they fought hard and well, killing many of the sorcerers, but when this one and the other six arrived on the scene, they were outmatched and almost all of them were killed.”

“Vydor, you said that you found a way to block their hallucination attack, so we should be able at least to prevent what we saw in your first video?” asked the chairman.

“Yes, I did, but it requires a very strong mind and a dedication that I would say fewer than ten percent of the Imperial forces can muster,” was my reply. I let that sit for a bit. I needed to prepare myself for the hard part: our resignation and request for recognition as a separate nation. Every life in the Empire depended on me pulling this off; I dared not fail. I was tempted to reach out with my powers and force the situation to play out the way it needed to, but a voice deep down inside me that I had not heard in a very long time cried out against that. I could barely hear it, but I knew it was right.

“Honored One, if this was the end of my report, it would be a sad day indeed for the Empire, but there is hope to be found. We successfully contacted a second group of aliens, known as wizards, and through them we learned much about the sorcerers, namely that they are currently locked in a very long and closely-matched war with the wizards. It seems that the sorcerers are in our realm looking for some new weapon which they believe is here, and they believe that weapon will grant them the needed edge for victory in their realm.”

“The enemy of an enemy is a friend,” commented the Emperor with a smile.

“Well spoken, Honored One. A representative of the ruling Council of Wizards who simply goes by the name Mantis contacted us. He is the one who showed us how to create the shield that just saved your life, and how to fight a sorcerer like Larath.” I paused here to think about what I should say next. However, before I could formulate my thoughts, the Emperor stood and raised his scepter. I knew that meant he was about to speak officially and whatever he decreed would be law.

“I have heard enough. I can see how the rest of the story plays out. Do not be surprised, there are after all seven of you,” he said with a smile, and then a serious look came over his face.

“By the power vested in me, I hereby grant Vydor, Kellyn, Andreya, Jerran, Gafar, Darnath, and Luke honorable discharge from their positions in the Imperial forces, and release them from their citizenship. Let the record show these men and women are worthy of the highest honor and respect for their dedicated service. So let it be written, so let it be done,” he declared.

“The High Command witnesses this declaration and shall obey,” came the reply from the chairman, who looked very confused.

“By the power vested in me, I hereby grant official recognition to the Council of Wizards for our realm as led by Grandmaster Vydor, and his ruling council comprised of Master Kellyn, Master Andreya, Master Jerran, Master Gafar, Master Darnath, and Master Luke. I also grant full ally status to said council and commit the full resources of the Empire to support them.”

“The High Command witnesses this declaration and shall obey,” came the reply from the chairman, who looked like he had finally caught on.

Well, he might not have been my childhood god any more, but he sure could still shock me! This really made no sense. How did he make that leap so fast? I wondered if it would be considered proper for me to grill him a little about this.

He sat down, indicating that his official ruling was complete. I promptly said, “Thank you, Honored One, your generosity and insight is without measure.”

“High Command, please leave us. I must speak and plan our defense with the Council of Wizards,” ordered the Emperor. It was a mostly forgotten custom that the Emperor directly handled

planning with allies, mainly because the Empire had assimilated all of its allies, but the High Command seemed to remember it since they left without complaint.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Once they were gone, the Emperor laid his scepter down next to his throne and said, "Please relax, we are equals now. No need for such formality."

Jerran took that as a cue to telekinetically lift some chairs and bring them to us. We all sat in them, and I lowered my hood. It seemed the Emperor wanted to talk about something but was worried about how we would take it.

"I owe you all an apology, it seems," he started. He seemed really distraught. "You see, many years ago I ordered the Black Adders to be formed and all who showed promise to be sent to Arken IV. The official reason, as you know, was to discover and perfect a defense against their powers, but that rapidly changed."

He paused there, and I could feel the surprise ripple through everyone. What could he mean? I did not dare interrupt him. I just sat in silence.

"I was warned almost half a century ago about this threat, and I was told their first move would be on Arken IV. At the time my plan was simple. By packing that planet with people who had what I thought to be great power, it would make our Empire look much stronger than it was, and hopefully deter any attack. If that failed, I believed the Black Adders would be able to defeat the invasion. To that end I expanded our search for anyone with power and made the base a permanent residence for them. It seems I grossly underestimated the power of our new enemy, and a lot of good people died because of it."

He stopped there and seemed to be waiting for a reaction. I could barely think for my surprise, but I managed to say, "Who warned you?"

He smiled. "Mantis, of course."

That sneaky old fool! He could have told us that, but no; he probably enjoyed how worried we were over all this. In fact, I would not have been surprised if he was watching us at that moment and laughing.

"Mantis is also the one behind you, Vydor," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"While the situation on Arken IV was developing, Mantis contacted me again. It was the first I had heard from him since his original contact, and he insisted that I assign you to the Dragon Claw and send the fleet in."

"So he has been behind all the odd coincidences, then," I said. "That ties up so many loose ends." I realized then that I had inadvertently stopped using the Emperor's formal title. I was truly speaking to him as if he was one of my shipmates, not my god. Then a crushing thought rocked my world. If the Emperor was not a god, who was? I did my best to put that thought away for later. I had more important business to attend to in the present.

"I take it that he also told you of his plan to make us the Council of Wizards for this realm?" I asked.

"No, that much I guessed by your show of power," he said with a grin. "I must say you did very well. You had High Command ready to follow you to war. Though I have to ask, why would a wizard hit someone on the head with his staff instead of using a more civilized blast?"

It was my turn to grin. "Easy. He knew how to fight against bolts of energy, but had no clue about hand-to-hand, or in this case, staff-to-head combat," I said proudly.

The Emperor laughed and said, "Mantis made a wise choice."

"Vydor, while he is in a good mood, now would be the time to ask for the Dark Talon," silently prompted Jerran.

"We have a favor to ask of the Empire. We need a vessel to operate as a mobile base," I started. "Since we are already familiar with her, we would like to keep the Dark Talon."

The Emperor thought about it for a moment then said, "I appreciate the humility of your request, but that ship is far too small to support your operations across interstellar space. I do see your

need for a ship though, and I happen to have a Raven Mark II here ready for its maiden voyage. I think it would serve you much better.”

The Raven was a cruiser class vessel, much larger than the Dark Talon, and was designed to run solo missions across interstellar space. It was a far more powerful vessel than I had any right to expect, and I was thinking of humbly refusing the offer, but then an image came to my mind. I pictured how we could redesign the Raven to have sections dedicated to meeting our need to study and grow, and since it was equipped to grow food for its crew we could travel great distances without support.

“A Mark II? I never heard of such a model,” I said. I was stalling; I needed more time to think about this. There was the problem, of course, that none of us had a clue how to operate a Raven, but we had solved that before with the Dark Talon.

“Yes, this prototype is a new version of the Raven. The old design is to be retired soon, and this will replace it throughout the fleet,” was his answer.

Over our connection I asked, “*Okay, how did you learn to fly the Dark Talon so fast? We may need that skill again very soon.*”

“*I found a spell in Mantis’ library that allows me to copy the knowledge of another. It does not copy any personal information or experience, just raw knowledge,*” was Darnath’s reply.

Well, that explained how the other Magi knew our technology so well. “*So then all we would need is to get some of his experts to allow us to cast that spell on them?*” I asked.

“*We do not need them to be willing, but yes,*” was his reply.

“*No, I think Vydor is right. We really should ask for permission before doing such a thing,*” commented Kellyn.

I needed to say something soon before the Emperor thought we had fallen asleep. “We graciously and humbly thank you for the Raven, but we are not trained on such a craft. If you can find us the top ten people who are trained on it, especially all the key positions and changes, we can use our powers to learn directly from them. They must be willing to let us do it, but it is painless and noninvasive.”

The Emperor thought about that for a bit and said, “I think that can be arranged.”

“Thank you. Once the Raven is ready we will park the Dark Talon in one of its bays and return it to the Dragon Claw,” I said.

“What is your next move in this war?” he asked.

“Well, for the moment we are still far too weak to take them on directly, so we will study and work on building up an army to support us. While doing that we plan to hunt down the remaining four spies we know about and execute them. The hope is that we can build up our forces before the sorcerers recover from the blow that was dealt to them at Arken IV.”

“I would much prefer if you let us handle the spies. Just give me the list and I will see to it that it is done. Meanwhile there is still the issue of this weapon they are looking for, I assume?”

“Yes. Mantis’ people and we ourselves will be looking for it too, but I suspect that it will be either Mantis and his wizards or the sorcerers who find it since we know nothing about it.”

“It is in our best interests if we find it first. I will give you whatever you need to hunt it down.”

After that we wrapped up the meeting and headed back to the Dark Talon. Once on board Kellyn had to point out that, since we did the right thing by not forcing the Emperor to do our will, we got a much better ship and more information than we could have guessed possible.

I knew she was right. It was just hard to get used to doing the right thing because it is the right thing, and not just blindly following orders. It was going to be a hard transition to make, from just another soldier to grandmaster wizard. My rulings and decisions in this war would determine the fate of the entire realm. What standard does one use to judge decisions by? It is easy to say just do the right thing, but who determines what is right? I used to think that was the responsibility of the Emperor, since he was god.

Again I was hit with the question: if the Emperor was a fallible human just like the rest of us, who was god? What did it mean to be god? Was it just the most powerful person around? I hoped not with all my heart, because I realized that that might very well be me. All through school and even in

the Academy we were taught from the point of view that the Emperor was god. In fact, a lot of what we understood about how the universe worked did not make sense if there was not a god. That would mean all of our science and understanding was wrong. But how could that be since everything worked the way it should? Then again, this was the same science that said magic did not exist.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It had been over a year since our first meeting with the Emperor and we had just finished refitting the new Raven to be our mobile headquarters. I was on board for one last visit to what had been our home. Today we would officially move into the Raven. I had decided to call it the "Nevermore" after an ancient poem. It seemed fitting, as I would never again see the universe and the Empire in the same way.

I looked around the Dark Talon knowing that this would be the last time I stood on her bridge. I would miss this little ship. "We should repair all the recording systems we disabled," I said.

"Aye, we can work on that during the flight back to the Dragon Claw. It should not take long," replied Luke.

I sighed. Even though we had all been living on the Nevermore for some time now, something about the fact that we would be launching the next day seemed to finalize the transition from the Dark Talon to the Nevermore. Over the last year so much had changed. When we came to this station we were all still Imperial soldiers at heart, doing the best we could to be the best Imperial soldiers we could be, and now we were leaving as the ruling council of a new nation. The move from the Dark Talon to the Nevermore seemed to symbolize that change in a way that was difficult for me to express.

I powered down the craft and made sure that everything was properly stowed one last time. Soon the robotic arms of the station would be loading this vessel into the launch bay of the Nevermore and she would not fly again until we rendezvoused with the Dragon Claw and her fleet. It would be good to return her to her family; there were still many Dark Knights left who wanted her back. I wondered what new impossible missions she would fly and if I would ever command her again.

"*Vydor, just a reminder that you need to contact the fleet soon,*" came Kellyn's sweet voice in my head.

"*Yes, you are right. I will go over now. Please meet me on the bridge,*" I responded. I took one last look around, then left the Dark Talon and headed towards the lift that would take me to the Nevermore.

This ship was much larger than the Dark Talon, and much more intimidating to behold. Its shiny, black saucer-like exterior with almost no external lights would normally make it hard to see in its native arena of interstellar space, but here in the brightly-lit station its lack of color made it stand out. Most of the other craft here were silver and had prominent accent colors and designs showing the pride of each crew. The bold statement made by the lack of color on our ship made it feel almost alien, as if it, and by implication we, did not really belong here.

As I passed the various men and women working on the station they all tried not to look, but failed. I knew many tales had been spread about us, and there was an uneasy sense of fear in everyone around us. It did not help that most of the time we stayed in our ship studying the books that Mantis had provided, but in the end I do not think that mattered much. We were just freaks of nature to them, very powerful ones, but freaks nonetheless.

In a way I missed my old life, just being a normal officer with normal officer worries. These people who stopped and stared would never know the burden I carried as grandmaster wizard. They would never know what it was like to realize that one mistake could spell the death of millions in the war with the sorcerers. Indeed, the only one of the non-magi that could seem to understand was their Emperor, and he spent most of his time alone.

Even he could not truly understand my position. He warned me against having any close relationships at all, as they would hinder my judgment at a crucial point, but how could I do that when I was in constant contact with my six closest friends via a pure and unfiltered telepathic link? The bond we shared was more than any human could understand. We were wizards, those called out of society to protect it.

Any further philosophical thoughts would have to wait since I had finally reached the bridge of the Nevermore. Kellyn was there waiting for me and beamed a large smile as I entered. That helped to

lessen the sadness of the lonely walk there. After a pleasant exchange of greetings we took our positions on the bridge. I sat in the captain's chair, and as always she took the spot closest to it.

"Okay, Kellyn, I am ready." I said.

Since we were docked in a secret location, all our communications had to be routed via the station's systems. This meant that we had to schedule time in advance for any external communications. My position gave me more leeway than most with the times, but in the end we all had to work within the limitations of the system. Eventually the call was put through and the familiar face of the captain of the Dragon Claw appeared on the screen. I had not spoken directly to him since we left the fleet, so I was not sure what to expect from him.

"Hello, Captain," I said. Because of all the encryption and routing being done there was a slight but noticeable delay in the conversation. It was annoying, but if you learned to take turns talking it was much less noticeable.

"Hi, Vydor. It has been too long since we last spoke."

"Indeed it has. I hate to skip the pleasantries but we are limited in how long we can use this channel, so I will get right to the point. I know that you are presently heading to investigate a situation developing on the remote base Terathan XV. Based on all the reports that I have access to, it sounds very similar to the situation at Arken IV before we arrived there. We plan to rendezvous with your fleet and join you in this investigation. We should be ready to launch tomorrow, and based on your last reported position it should take us about a week to reach you."

"A week? Then you have certainly upgraded your ship from the Dark Talon."

"Yes, Captain, but do not worry. We will be bringing her along to return to the Dark Knights."

"Very well, I will hold on here and send our exact location to you before you launch. It will be good to have you back for this. What route do you plan to take?"

Since jumps were dependent on missing large gravity wells, they had to be carefully routed well in advance. At one time every trip started with a group of experts poring over maps, trying to plot the best series of jumps to clear various sections of space. Over time that changed and a vast database of all known safe routes was built.

"Now, Captain, I have a full day yet to plan. What makes you think I have any idea yet what route I will take?" I said.

"You're right, I should know better than to ask you about planning ahead," he said with a chuckle. "You might want to avoid the Batialan route, as there are reports of an uprising at the prison colony there."

The colony that he was referring to was a place where the absolute worst of society was kept and put into hard labor in the mines there. While this allowed many to escape the death sentence, life in such places was fairly grim. This meant that they felt they had nothing to lose, so every now and again they would try to rise up and take over the colony. The Empire always dealt with it in the same way; the military was called in and anyone who resisted them was killed. This meant the entire area would be under a tight lockdown, and any ship traveling through it would be delayed and probably searched. Since our ship was not Imperial property or lands, I could refuse such a search, but there was no avoiding the delays that would cause. It was best to take a different route.

"Thank you for that warning. I will definitely choose a different route." After that we got the warning beep from the station telling us our time was almost up. They would not dare to interrupt one of my communications, but I learned long ago that cooperation with the system tended to get you more goodwill when the time came that you most needed it. "It seems our time is up. It will be good to be off this base and free from these limitations, but now I must go. Thank you, Captain, and we will see you in a week." With that we both signed off.

"Kellyn, I am going to tour the ship one last time then go to dinner. Would you be available to join me in say, two hours?"

"I would love to. See you then."

It was customary for a captain to tour the ship, visiting every section before any mission. I was not sure how one did that on a ship as large as the Dragon Claw, but on the Nevermore it was much more feasible.

The bridge was in the center of the ship, so I decided to take the lift to the topmost level to start my tour there. The top level was my favorite level. It contained our entertainment areas, a large, observational lounge and the ship's mess hall. The observational lounge was a room of my own design. I had had them rip out almost all the walls on the floor and put in couches, recliners, and other comfortable seating. There were several food preparation areas scattered around the deck where anyone could make themselves a full meal or a light snack. The main feature of the room was the extensive view it had of the outside. The ceiling and walls were covered with high-resolution viewscreens that were tied to external cameras, so it gave the impression of standing under a glass ceiling looking at the night sky. In reality what was behind the viewscreens were many layers of extra-thick armor plating, but it was easy to forget that and believe you were out there in this room. Since we were inside a space dock, presently the screens were displaying a view from outside the station instead. So looking up I could see the blue-green ball that was the planet we orbited.

I briefly wondered what it was like to live on a planet, being stuck anchored to a star with scenery that never changes. I thought it must be lonely and claustrophobic to be trapped like that. I much preferred the openness of space and the constant change of travel.

Also on this level was the mostly unused fitness and exercise room. I knew it was important to have one, and my years of service in the Navy ingrained in me a need to use it regularly, but I seemed to be alone in this belief, and that made it too easy to fall out of the habit. Not only did I need to force myself to use the equipment more often, I knew I should encourage the others to use it too. A healthy body was important, even for a Magus.

From there I went down to the next level which contained our library and research areas. The library was filled with all the books that Mantis had given us, which was a lot more than should have been able to fit in the chest they came in. One of the things we had learned about him over the last year was that he enjoyed things that should not work, such as taking very large objects out of very small containers, or in this case a lot of books out of too small a box. Even with all these books, the library shelves were mostly empty. I had big dreams of amassing a great amount of knowledge to store there, and used most of that level for the library. Throughout the library I had a mix of little private reading nooks and large tables to accommodate group research. Most of our time lately had been spent in there studying all that we had, and trying out as much as we could.

Also on this level was the Crystal Room. This was a secure room with no physical doors, and no one other than Mantis and the seven of us had seen it since we had ordered the station's workers to seal it off. The last they saw of the room, it was completely empty. They thought we were nuts for wasting that space. The room did not stay empty for long, thanks to some donations from Mantis.

Inside the room was a round table made of pure, polished amethyst surrounded by seven thrones. In the center of the table was a diamond sphere that we used to communicate with Mantis. The room was not only sealed physically, it was also sealed with the most powerful magic locks we could muster, and whenever we learned of better spells we upgraded them immediately. This was our official council chamber where we met to make rulings and plans. It was sealed off from the noise of life so that we could focus on the task at hand, and secured so that no one could monitor our discussions.

From there I went down to the next level, which contained the crew's quarters. This level was mostly empty since the ship was designed to carry one hundred and fifty families, and there were only seven of us. With all this space to spread out, we ended up choosing seven rooms that were all in a cluster together. The rooms were all very similar. They each contained a sleeping section, a bathing section, and an area for eating and working. The ship had a larger room that was typically used for captain's quarters, but I decided to make it into a guest suite for entertaining official dignitaries. Each of our rooms had a telepathic seal on it so that we each had a place to retreat to, a little bit of solitude to help balance the constant close contact that our powers caused between us. This was something the others insisted on, and I did not understand at first. They had spent most of their lives living with their

minds in virtual glass houses, and I had only just begun to experience the openness of it all. For them these rooms were a lifelong dream, and for me it almost seemed like a step back to my previous life. Since it was so important to them, I did not fight them at all on it. Now that I had spent more time in that glass house with them, I was beginning to understand the need for these sanctuaries of peace.

Below that level was the central core of the ship. All the critical ship's systems were here, including the bridge, central computer core, engine rooms, and medical wing. The medical wing was a bit superfluous for us, since Kellyn's was far superior to any mundane medical treatment, but Darnath pointed out that someday Kellyn might get hurt and we might need it.

When the council was formed Mantis had said we would all need to learn all forms of magic, but that seemed to be impossible. Each of us knew the basics of all the powers, but could only excel in one or two areas. Any of us could heal basic wounds and sickness, but if it was serious only Kellyn could heal it. The same was true of Gafar's ability to probe minds. When I questioned Mantis about it he just laughed, and never did answer. Mantis, for all his desire to help, was often a bit hard to make out.

The ship's machine shop and fabrication rooms were on this level too. There we could make whatever parts or equipment we would need, assuming we had enough raw materials on hand. Everything on the ship was designed to be recyclable so that in a pinch we could rip out nonessential parts and reuse them to make repairs to crucial systems.

The next level was taken up entirely by the ship's gardens. Here was the source of all of our food and oxygen. A large force of robotic workers maintained most of it, but Kellyn had staked out a plot of her own. It produced no food; she just wanted a place to grow some pretty flowers. Since most of what was grown we could never have begun to eat, giving a small plot to her was a luxury we could afford.

The lowest level on the Nevermore was mostly unused at this time. It was the area designated for teaching and training new wizards. Jerran was often down there practicing his spells. He had a real affinity for explosive and fire magic so he needed a safe place to work where he would not be in danger of destroying anything. In fact, it was during one of his practice sessions we learned just how much Kellyn's healing power was growing.

Luke, who also had an affinity for elemental magic, often came down here to practice his art too, though his was more centered on electricity than fire.

Andreya had it much easier, as she could practice her powers anywhere. Andreya was undoubtedly the master of illusions, such that even the master wizards of Mantis's realm were impressed by her skill. According to Mantis there were very few who could match her, and he knew only of one to exceed her, and that wizard was a member of their council!

Kellyn had a lot of opportunity to practice her healing arts during the refitting of the ship, as many workers throughout the station learned to come to her first for treatment of any serious injury. Her skill grew at a phenomenal rate. At one point I personally witnessed her cause a man to grow a new arm that he had lost in a blaster misfire many years before. After a while, we had to set specific hours during which people could come to her for treatment, just to prevent her from getting overworked. The station workers might have feared us, but they were sure to miss her.

Darnath also would come down here to practice his art. We were a little surprised that Darnath turned out to be the one to have an affinity for summoning magic. He could call forth all kinds of creatures to help us in our tasks.

The shuttle bays were on this level, and soon the Dark Talon would be parked in one of them. The Nevermore was too massive to be practical for use in reaching the surface of a planet, so I requested several small ships similar to the Dark Talon to be used for that purpose and for other times when we needed small vessels. The Emperor gave us three such craft, which was less than I wanted, but more than I expected so I guess it worked out for the best.

That completed my tour of the ship so I headed for the mess hall to meet Kellyn. She naturally knew when I was coming, so the fact that I was thirty minutes late was not an issue. As I arrived she

was just finishing laying out a nice steak dinner. I smiled as I saw her; she was stunning with her long, dark hair and slender build.

Somewhere along the line we gave up any hope of hiding our growing relationship. At first we both tried to deny it, even to each other, but none of the others believed us. Why should they have? After all, we all had basic telepathic powers.

Because of the pace of life - her clinic, the work necessary to get this ship ready, and the intense study - we had not had a lot of time to spend together over the last year, but we made it a point to meet for dinner like this as often as possible. The others always seemed to find something else to do when we met up, for which we were grateful. Of course, the only time we were truly alone was when we visited each other's quarters. This was a special dinner, though, and I did everything I could to make sure she did not guess it. That was not easy considering how deeply she knew me, but I believed I had been successful.

Our conversation at first was very casual and wandered around from topic to topic. Then she mentioned how nice it would be for me to see my old shipmates on the Dragon Claw again. That was the opening I was looking for. *"That will be nice, especially to see the captain again,"* I said.

I paused and reached into my pocket and pulled out a small box. She gasped when she saw it. Before she could say anything, I opened it and showed her a diamond ring. *"Kellyn, would you accept me as your husband?"*

She broke down in tears; I was not expecting that reaction. Unsure what to do next, I just sat there. Then, speechless, she held out her hand and nodded. I placed the ring on her finger and said, *"I would like the captain to marry us when we meet up with the fleet."*

She could not get any words out but the emotions overwhelming our connection were clear, a mixture of shock, joy and love. When she could finally talk she said, *"And all this time I thought I could predict your every move!"*

After we had talked for some time, Andreyia finally lost her patience and barged into the room to congratulate us. Kellyn asked her to be her maid of honor, and Andreyia let her know that there was no way she would let Kellyn even think of giving that position to anyone else. From then on all the excited talk was about where and how to have the wedding. Andreyia suggested that she should do all the decorations, and Kellyn said she wanted to hold it down in the gardens. After a while I left them to work out the plans. I knew that a man's place in such affairs was just to smile and nod, so I left to get out of the way.

I headed to the library to read, and was met by Darnath, Gafar and Luke in the lift. After their playful kidding around Gafar spoke up and said, "Okay, Vydor, how did you keep that hidden?" Gafar, being a master telepath was a bit put out by the fact even he had not known.

"Easy, I am the grandmaster wizard, remember?" I said.

"No, seriously. I never even saw you buy the ring. You must let me in on your secret."

I smiled an evil smile and tried to come up with my best Mantis impression, "That's simple, because you did not know to look."

"I guess a bachelor party is out of the question," commented Luke.

"Yes, I think that would be a horrible idea," I said as quickly as I could, which brought on more kidding from them about me being henpecked already, until we all heard Kellyn remark how terrible it would be if she just let us suffer the next time we got sick.

Once I finally got away from the jokers, I was able to get to the library to study. The first thing I wanted to do was resync the ship's database with the station's database so that we would have the most accurate information possible before we left the next day. That would take several hours, and probably generate a few complaints from the station administrators, but since I would be gone tomorrow I was not too worried about their wrath.

While that worked I started digging through what we already had. I wanted to see if there were any legends or myths that could explain the dark specter. Tomorrow would be the first time we reentered jump space in over a year, and I was not looking forward to another contest with him. In fact,

I was worried about it. Sooner or later I knew he would win, the question was when. He seemed so much closer and more powerful the last time I saw him than ever before.

While I searched I felt Kellyn's familiar touch as she ran her fingers through my hair. She wanted me to grow it out now that we were free from the Imperial requirement of short hair, and I was glad to oblige. *"Vydor, you are scared. I can tell."*

"Yes, I cannot hide that from you. Tomorrow we will face him again."

"I will be with you, and we are much greater than the last time we fought him. We have both grown considerably in power; he does not stand a chance. With your awesome might and my healing, how could he win? You are no longer a helpless mortal; you are the grandmaster of wizards!"

"You are right, of course, thank you. But there is something else I need to tell you, something you should know before we get married." As I said that I pictured my father on his deathbed, and his father before him, and so on.

To my surprise she just smiled and said, *"Oh, Vydor, I know about all that. The reason medical science cannot cure it is because it is not a physical illness."*

"What do you mean?"

"The dark specter that chases you is the cause of it. It is a dark curse on your family line going back more generations than I can imagine. When we beat the dark specter, that will be the end of the disease too, and until then I can keep you healthy. Now, I am off to bed. I hope to get an early start and make one last pass through the hospital before we leave," she said, then gave me a kiss and left.

If I was the grandmaster wizard, why did I feel like a child playing at being god? I shut off the terminal and headed for bed. I would need my energy for the next day, that was certain.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

My alarm told me that it was time to get up, but I had not had much sleep. I spent the night fighting off nightmares. Ready or not, we would be leaving soon, so I headed up to the bridge.

When I arrived, everyone except Kellyn was there; apparently she was still in the clinic curing people. *"We will launch when Kellyn is finished. Darnath, is the jump route laid in?"*

"Yes, everything should be set," he responded.

"Okay, just a word of warning. Kellyn and I will not be meditating before the jump, so you will have to handle everything during our recovery."

"Vydor, only Darnath needs to be awake after the jump to execute the second jump. The rest of us will stand with you," said Andreya.

"The six of us bring a lot of power to the table. Your demon does not stand a chance against the united force of the Council of Wizards," declared Gafar.

I looked at each of them as they all indicated they would not let me stand alone, and I was touched by their dedication. *"You are right, for if any of us tries to stand alone, we will fall,"* I said. I was not sure where that came from; someplace deep inside me, some forgotten corner of my memory.

Not long after, Kellyn returned and came up to the bridge. She looked lovingly at everyone and said, *"Thank you."*

I contacted the station and requested permission to launch, to which the reply came that we were clear to do so. *"Gafar, engage stealth mode and take us out."* It was important that we did not give away the location of where we had been staying, since everyone knew we had come to meet with the Emperor. After we cleared the station I said, *"Best speed to jump space."*

"I estimate ten minutes until we can jump," said Gafar.

"Wow, this ship is impressive. It would have taken an hour with the Dark Talon," I replied. The ship did not lurch forward like the Dark Talon did; it was a very smooth and even acceleration. The only indication of the change in speed was a slight change in pitch of the engines, which were an ever-present background noise.

"Jumping in ten, nine, eight, seven, six ..." As Darnath counted down I felt four sets of hands being placed on my back, and Kellyn grabbed my hand with both of hers. *"...three, two..."*

Suddenly we were in jump space, and this time I turned completely around and faced the demon head-on. I looked him right in the eye and called out, "Not this time!"

I lowered my right hand at him and cast a great bolt of energy directly at him that pushed him back quite a bit, but he recovered quickly and charged. Then I felt power pouring into me from the others, and I grabbed all that power and cast the bolt again. This time the blast hit him hard enough to knock me back and keep him at a very great distance. Just then the ship dropped back into normal space, quickly reentering jump space as we executed our second jump.

This time the dark specter was standing calmly at a great distance. He just stood there staring me down, as if to say, "Time is on my side. I will have you sooner or later." This time I looked to the other spirit that followed me, and he looked greatly pleased. It was as if he was basking in the light from the love and support of my fellow wizards. Before I could try to talk to him, we reentered normal space.

Once we had all recovered, I saw Darnath looking very anxious to know what had happened. I turned to him and said, *"Round one goes to the Council of Wizards!"* This brought much cheering and exchanges of high fives.

"Vydor, I want you to know we are in this for the long haul. We realize that we will have to do this during every jump until we have victory, but victory will be ours as long as we remember what you said about standing alone," said Andreya.

"Thank you, Andreya, that means a lot to me. Darnath, what is our ETA to the Dragon Claw from here?" I asked.

"I expect we will meet up with the Dragon Claw in about seven days," he responded. *"Our next jump will be in thirteen hours, as we have to coast by this neutron field before we can jump again."*

"Kellyn, please join me in the ready room. I think we have some news to discuss with the captain." The ready room was a room off to the side of the bridge that was used primarily as an office for the captain of the ship. On our ship we had no real use for it, but I thought it would be more proper to use that for this conversation than the general viewing screen. Mundane people really did not understand that they never talked to just one of us, so they naturally felt more comfortable with more private settings. I guess it helped them to forget how different we were.

I took my seat in front of the screen while Kellyn put us through.

"Greetings, Master Vydor," said the captain. I was surprised at his use of the formal title. I wondered if he was trying to get used to my new position.

"Hello, Captain. Now that we are en route I can talk a bit more freely," I said.

"That is good to hear. When do you think you will get here?" he asked.

"Darnath estimates seven days on our present course. We are currently coasting by a gravity well and will not be able to jump again for thirteen hours," I said.

"We have lost all contact with Terathan XV. This is playing out exactly like Arken IV. I would like to get there as soon as possible. Is there any way you can get here sooner?" he asked.

"Well, this is the shortest route that the station's computers found for us. I could ask Darnath to see if he can work out a faster one," I said.

"I hear you are in a Raven. If I estimate your location correctly, I think you can make it in four days."

"Well, it is a Raven Mark II, actually, so we have twenty-five per cent greater jump range than a Mark I."

"Excellent, then you should have no problem with this shorter route."

"Well it seems you have a better database of routes than we were given access to. If you can send it, that would be great."

"I will get one of my officers to contact Darnath and they can work it out."

"Captain, now that is out of the way, I have a personal request to make of you."

"Certainly, Vydor," he answered.

"Kellyn, come sit by me," I said privately. Once she was settled I turned to the captain and said, "Captain, let me properly introduce to you Master Kellyn, formerly of the Black Adders, and now master wizard and member of the Council of Wizards."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Master Kellyn," he said.

She smiled and said, "Thank you, I am sure the honor is all mine."

"Captain, would you do us the honor of marrying us?" I asked.

"Vydor, I would be honored!" he said with a big grin. "You can use our wedding chapel and all our facilities here."

"Thank you, Captain, but Kellyn wants to get married here in her private garden," I said.

"Well, I have done many weddings in my time and one thing I have learned is that you never argue with the bride. If Kellyn wants it in her garden, then I will do it nowhere else. Kellyn, if it would be acceptable to you, I would like to host your reception here in our banquet hall. There are a lot of Vydor's old shipmates who will want to come."

"Captain, that is a most gracious offer, and I am happy to accept. Invite all whom you feel proper to the reception, but please only yourself, Zalith, and Dr. Rannor to the actual wedding. My garden is not big enough to hold many, and we will already have the seven of us," was her reply.

"Wonderful, then it is all set. Carol will contact you about the arrangements after you arrive," he said.

"Captain, can you ask Carol to contact Andreyra instead? She is handling the arrangements for Kellyn," I said.

"Thank you, Vydor," responded Kellyn privately.

“Certainly. I must get back to my duties here, but I look forward to seeing you in a few days’ time,” he said and we wrapped up the call.

“*FOUR DAYS???* *HOW AM I GOING TO PLAN THIS IN FOUR DAYS?!?!?*” started Kellyn. Being the grandmaster wizard, supposedly with more power and knowledge than any other mortal in the realm, I knew exactly what to do. I called in Andreya to help with Kellyn’s panic attack, and slipped out.

I headed back to my quarters, planning to get some rest. When I entered my room I saw the book on my shelf. It had been over a year since I had first cast the spell which allowed me to read it, but I had not yet opened the cover. Something inside told me I was not ready yet, and still warned me against it. Logically there was no reason to worry; it was just a book, but I could not get past that feeling that it was not yet the right time. Yet I knew in some way that this book had the answers I needed.

Just as I decided to sit and read it, I heard a voice come over our intercom. “Vydor, I just got off the line with the Dragon Claw, and we have a nice data stream coming in updating all of our navigational data. It seems likely with the updated maps we can be clear of this field in six hours and should make it to the Dragon Claw’s present position in about three days.” It was odd to actually hear a voice on this ship and it took me a minute to place it as Darnath’s. He had to use that to contact me because I was in my quarters.

“Thank you for the update, Darnath. As you heard the captain say, we need to get there as soon as we can, so take whichever course is fastest. I am going to get some sleep. Ask someone to wake me before the next jump,” I responded.

“Sure thing, Vydor,” he replied.

I looked again at the book. It was not very remarkable from the outside. In fact, compared to the books from Mantis, it was downright plain. I thumbed through it briefly without really reading it and it seemed to be a collection of shorter books. Well, that would have to wait until after this mission. I could not afford to be distracted by a new project just yet.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Vydor, this is our final jump. It should put us only ten minutes from the fleet,” came Darnath’s report as I entered the bridge.

“Excellent,” I replied. The last few days since we spoke to the captain had been fairly uneventful. Kellyn and Andreya talked constantly about wedding plans, and I mostly stayed in the library studying everything we had on the sorcerers.

We all took our positions for the jump, which now entailed everyone except Darnath being in physical contact with me. The dark specter had not tried again since the first encounter he had with all six of us, but he stayed close by, ready for any opening. I knew that he had grown too powerful, and that alone I could never stand against him, but he was no match for the six of us. This jump was no exception. He stood and waited, again giving the impression of saying, *“Time is on my side. I can wait.”*

When we came back into normal space, on the viewing screen in front of me was the fleet. I had forgotten how massive it was. From this angle we could not see all of it. It spread out far wider than our viewing screens could reach.

“I had better contact them before we drop out of stealth, just in case they are a bit trigger-happy,” I commented. Kellyn brought up the connection on the main viewer, and soon the captain appeared.

“Greetings, Captain, we are about nine minutes from your wake at present, and are about to drop out of stealth,” I said.

“Excellent. As soon as you can, establish the graviton link and pass navigation over to us for the next jump. There will be about a day and a half on the other side of the jump while we skirt around a black hole, so we can have your celebration then,” he said.

Our ship’s engines would not be ready to make another jump for hours yet, but relative to the fleet we were so insignificant that they would just drag us along.

“Darnath will get that link up as soon as we are in range. Captain, why don’t you, Dr. Rannor and Zalith join us for dinner after the jump?” I asked.

“That sounds like a great idea, say at 2000?” he asked.

“2000 it is, then,” I said and we ended the transmission.

After the jump Darnath ran up to the mess hall to start cooking. He came from a long line of chefs and we persuaded him into volunteering to cook all the major meals. Kellyn and I also went up to prepare the table and make sure all was in order.

Gafar offered to stay and watch the bridge during the dinner. Out here in interstellar space it was unwise to leave the bridge unmanned. There were too many unknowns to deal with.

“Thank you, Gafar, but this is going to be a problem during the wedding tomorrow. I do not want anyone to have to miss it,” I said.

“Well, maybe the captain can spare some crew members to stand watch so that we need not worry about that,” offered Kellyn.

“That is a brilliant idea,” I said. I was a bit annoyed I had not thought of such a simple answer.

While waiting for dinner, I went to the ship’s library and focused on crafting the scrolls I would need for the battle. I was deep into this preparation when I heard Gafar send from the bridge, *“Vydor, the captain’s shuttle is on its way.”*

“Okay, I guess we are ready. Land them in bay two.” Zalith would no doubt want to see the Dark Talon, so it was easiest to have them dock in the same bay. We went down to meet them. As soon as the bay was pressurized, we entered it.

Zalith was the first off the shuttle. I walked right up to him and gestured at the Dark Talon while saying, *“Hello, old friend, the Dark Talon is ready for you to fly her home after the meal.”*

“Thank you, Vydor, but I took the liberty of bringing two Dark Knights to take her home now.” As he said that, they came off the shuttle. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was worried what they would think of me, since I had led twenty-five of their squadmates to their death.

One of them walked right up to me and looked directly into my eyes. He was a good half-meter taller than me, but I looked up and held his gaze. I knew that was what he would expect.

“Vydor, we reviewed the logs and journals of your mission, and we are impressed at your honor and valor in the face of death. The battle was won because of your leadership,” he said and handed me an emblem.

I had to break his gaze to see what it was, and I barely held my composure. It was the emblem of the Dark Knights. The significance of this gift was not lost on me; I knew what it meant. They now numbered me as one of their own. Using a minor bit of magic I attached it to my staff, which had become the symbol of my rank. “It will be an honor to fight with the Dark Knights again,” I said with as much pride in my voice as I could muster.

He just gave a slight nod, and they went over to the Dark Talon. I saw that the captain and Dr. Rannor had disembarked from the shuttle. “Well, if I know the Dark Knights they will be asking for clearance to launch right away, so let’s move out of the bay,” I commented. As we exited I told Gafar to give the Knights clearance to launch as soon as they were ready.

Once we were out in the hall, proper greetings and introductions were exchanged all around. Kellyn seemed to be a bit embarrassed over the compliments she received, but she deserved them all and more. As we walked through the training rooms on our way to the lift I noticed the captain was looking around. I wondered what he was looking for. Soon we got to the lift and were on our way to the top deck, and the observation lounge.

On the ride up, the captain remarked, “You know, Vydor, for some reason I was expecting strange things, but so far your Raven looks, well ... normal.”

I just smiled and opened the door to the observation lounge with its wide-open view of the fleet around us. Our visitors caught their breath as they walked out under it. They did not say anything for quite some time, and we just let them take it all in. I finally could not resist any longer and said, “I think you were saying something about how normal the ship was?”

“This is an awesome view, Vydor. It is easy to forget what is out there when you spend your time moving from one office to another on the Dragon Claw,” said the captain.

“Yes, we eat most of our meals up here under the stars. It is quite humbling,” I responded.

Darnath, Andreyra, Jerran and Luke joined us and we moved over to the table to eat. For a while the conversation over the food was mostly small talk, but eventually it moved to questions about us. Dr. Rannor began by asking, “Kellyn, is it true what they say about you?”

“Well, that depends on what they are saying,” she replied.

“They say you can instantly heal any injury or illness,” he said.

“Well, not exactly. I can heal, but my powers are limited. For instance, I cannot turn back time and make anyone younger, nor can I help anyone who is already dead. Minor injuries are easy, but major things like growing new limbs or organs take a lot out of me. Mental illnesses are beyond me at this stage, which is baffling. I am also fairly limited in the type of healing I can do. For example, if a person is brain-damaged, I can heal the physical brain, but I cannot return to the person the memories and abilities that were lost,” she replied.

“That is remarkable,” he said.

“We are also told that you all talk to each other without speaking, can move objects without touching them, and other impossible feats. How much of these stories are true?” asked the captain.

“They are probably blown out of all proportion but we can do what you just listed. You must understand that we are fairly weak compared to those we will be going up against. We have only had a year to study and practice, and these arts take a lifetime to master,” I said.

“How does this all work?” asked Dr. Rannor.

“It is not as mystical as you might think. There is an energy force is woven through the universe which does not seem to interact at all with normal matter, at least not in any way we have

been able to detect. Some people are born with an ability to tap and use this energy, and that is how we achieve what we do. The chanting, wands, and other trappings are used to help focus and store the energy, which is where it starts looking mystical. It seems that each of us is gifted in a different way so that what we can do with the energy is a little different. We can all do some basic things, such as talk telepathically, but for the most part our powers are sharply divided. For example, Kellyn is the only one of us who can heal a serious wound, while Andreyra is a master of illusions,” I said.

“You make it sound so simple and normal, yet we have seen what the sorcerers can do with this energy so we know there is great power in it. You say you cannot match them yet, so how are we going to fight them?” asked Zalith.

“We are hoping that when combined with the power of the fleet we will stand a chance. In truth we had planned to stay in hiding for a few more years, but the recent developments out here make me a bit concerned. We need to monitor the situation, at least. I fear if the Seven are here then the sector is theirs and there is not much we can do about it. Historically, though, the Seven have not been known to come out to fight if they think the master wizards are around to fight back, so we are banking on them overestimating us.”

“Are you saying that their most powerful leaders are cowards?” asked Zalith.

“Well, I studied the history of the war they are fighting with the wizards of the other realm, and that is the pattern I have found. They always retreat when the grandmaster wizard or any of the master wizards appear on the scene and send in their underlings to fight for them, and our combined forces should be able to handle their underlings,” I said.

“That is simply unbelievable: to have all that power, and then be afraid to stand and fight,” commented Zalith.

While they continued to ask questions of the others, a thought occurred to me. “*Gafar, Dr. Rannor’s brain has several memory blocks in it. We do not know who put them there or why. Assuming he agrees, can you remove them, as you did for me?*” I asked telepathically.

“*Most likely, but it would be a fairly invasive probe and he would not be able to hide anything,*” he replied.

“Well, this has been a great visit, but we must be getting back to the Dragon Claw. Rumor has it I have to get up early for a big event tomorrow,” said the captain.

“I understand, Captain. Too bad you cannot stay for a tour of our little ship. We had to completely gut it and start over to make it the way we wanted,” I said.

“Perhaps another time,” he said.

After that Kellyn was whisked away by Andreyra: something about not seeing the bride before the wedding. I started to protest but the captain reminded me never to argue with a bride about her wedding.

Once we got to the bay I stopped them and said, “Captain, I have another favor to ask. We would like all seven of us to attend the wedding and reception, but that would leave the Nevermore with no one on watch. Would it be possible for you to send over some trusted officers to stand watch for us?”

Zalith turned, gestured at the new emblem on my staff and said, “The Dark Knights would be honored to come to your aid.”

“Then that is settled. We will send them over in the morning,” said the captain.

“Vydor, if you don’t mind, I would like to stay behind and take that tour you offered,” said Dr. Rannor.

“Of course, we can fly you back later if you wish, or you are welcome to stay in our guest quarters,” I said.

“Well, if it is no trouble to you, I would rather stay until the wedding,” he said.

I was surprised by his request, but it was no problem, so I granted it.

With that settled, the captain and Zalith boarded the shuttle and left. Zalith’s comment about the Dark Knights and their gift of the emblem had lifted from me a heavy burden I had carried since I had lost the squad. All this time I thought I had failed, yet had it not played out the way it had I would

never have met the Black Adders and we would have lost the fight for that planet, which would have spelled the end of the Empire. The weight that lifted from me was amazing. I had felt stifled all this time by that guilt.

Then I realized that was the weakness exploited by the dark specter in the gate. Every time I let my anger and depression get the better of me, he grew stronger. When I had nothing but love and support around me, he was powerless. This was an amazing breakthrough. I had to share it with Kellyn, but she was in Andrey's quarters and out of my reach. I asked Darnath to get a message to her, and after some argument he agreed to try, but made no promises of getting past Andrey.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Once the shuttle was gone I turned to the good doctor and asked, "Do you really want a tour, or would you prefer a comfortable place to sit and talk?"

"I think a talk would be good," he said.

"Then let's go to the library," I said and led him to the lift.

We rode up in silence; he seemed nervous. I wanted to reach out and find out what was wrong, but I resisted. He deserved the privacy of his own thoughts. When we finally entered the library he looked around and said, "Impressive."

"Come now, Doctor, the only thing impressive about this library is its room to grow," I said.

"What do you mean? You have more real books on that one shelf alone than I have seen in my entire life!" was his reply.

I looked around the room and said, "Funny how two people can see the exact same thing and get such different first impressions."

"I think it has to do with what you have to compare it to. Obviously you have seen a much greater library, and I have not."

"Yes, I have and most of these books are copies from it. Come this way. I have a place where we can sit with access to refreshments." I was not sure when I had picked up the habit, but I rarely read any more without snacks or a drink of some kind.

We entered an area of the library that had very few shelves; instead it had big, comfortable reading chairs, end tables and a small food locker. This was my favorite area of the library. Its partial seclusion allowed me to become immersed in what I was reading.

I got myself a big mug of coffee and asked, "Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you," he said.

I settled into my favorite chair, and he sat across from me. "Now then, Doctor, what is on your mind?"

"Well, Vydor, remember those memory blocks we spoke about last year? Did you ever find out if you had more?"

"That was the only one, and it appears to have been put in place because of the secret message I was decoding at the time," I said.

"Ah. Well, I was able to find out more about mine. This is the strangest thing; it turns out they are of my own doing."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, perhaps I should show you," he said, as my cup began to float up.

I scanned the room, found the source of the power and traced it back to Dr. Rannor.

"Yes," he said, lowering the cup. "You see, a while back I found I could do that, but I knew of the decree about the Black Adders, and I didn't want to be imprisoned like them. So I contacted Larath and asked for his help. At the time he was more than happy to help me forget everything I could do."

"Of course. He was eliminating a potential enemy with no risk of being discovered," I said.

"When you killed him, his spell broke and all my memories came back," he said.

"Now that is a revelation. What powers do you have?" I asked.

"Not much. I can lift very small things like your cup, and I can sometimes detect people just before they open the door or come into view," he said.

"Well, that is a start, and it shows that you definitely have the gift. What do you plan to do now?" I was stalling while I updated the five members of the Council that I could reach. This was a big discovery, big enough that Andreyra relayed messages verbally to Kellyn. This was the first Magus from our realm we had found since the Council was formed. "*Gafar, if he exists, there could be more. Do what you can to scan the fleet with minimal penetration. We need to know if there are others like him whom Larath mentally locked up, or any other sorcerers.*"

“That will take some time, a lot of time; but I will do what I can. It would probably be best if I start with the Dragon Claw and work out from there, since that is where his influence would have been the greatest,” he responded.

“That is just it, Vydor, I don’t know what to do now. Frankly, I am far too old to be of any use in the war, and I am due for retirement this week,” said Dr. Rannor.

Retirement in the Navy was a bit of a loose term, as there was no place for him to go until the fleet happened to pass by a station that could take him. And since we were just starting a mission, that would be a while yet. He was still thinking out what he wanted to say, so I let him work on it while I discussed our next move with the other wizards. Ultimately the choice was mine to make and not his, but I was not going to strongarm him into anything.

“There is only one real option, he must join us,” said Darnath.

“Age is not an issue for our art. In fact, I am sure Mantis is far older than all of us combined,” said Andreyia.

“You guessed Mantis to be a lot younger than I did, then,” said Luke, *“though I am not sure he has quite grown up.”*

Finally Dr. Rannor said, “Vydor, can I stay here for a while instead of returning to the Dragon Claw? I need a quiet place to contemplate things.”

“Of course. Doctor, I am not sure how to put this; though this discovery of yours is exciting for us, it will complicate things for you,” I said.

“Exciting? Complicated? How so?” he asked.

“Well, this is exciting because you are the first Magus from our realm we have found since we returned. Complicated, because you are the first Magus from our realm we have found since we returned.” I had to concede Darnath’s point that Dr. Rannor, as a Magus, had to submit to our rule, but that seemed somewhat totalitarian. “Dr. Rannor, we need to explain something to you. As a Magus you fall under the direct authority of the Council of Wizards, and are no longer responsible to the Emperor. Now, you do have a choice. You can retire in peace and forget about your powers, and hope the war never reaches you, or you can come to live on this ship with us as our first student-level wizard. Either way, the choice is under my jurisdiction, not the captain’s or the Emperor’s, though we will behave in a civil manner over the affair,” I said.

He needed to sit and think that over a while, so I decided to help his decision along. “Dr. Rannor, before you make any decision there are a couple more things I would like to say. First, your age is not an issue for our art. It is only because our council is so new that we are all so young. Every master-level wizard or sorcerer that we know of is much older than you. The amount of wisdom and knowledge the position calls for is not normally found in the young. Second, I would love it if you would come be part of our team. I think you would be a great asset and besides, we need someone to treat Kellyn if she gets sick.” I stood, finished my drink and said, “Whatever your decision, you are welcome to stay on board here as long as you need. Just remember we are heading to the front line, and it could be a bumpy ride.”

I was about to leave him to think when he said, “Vydor, I really do not need to think this over. I just had to convince myself to take the step. The captain knows why I am here, and he has already offered to release me if you would take me. It is just that I am an old man. I am used to being a ship’s doctor. I know how to do that well; in a way, it is all that I am. What we are talking about is a huge departure from that, and frankly it is terrifying.”

I got down to his level. “You are not just a ship’s doctor. If titles are so important, then you should know that you have already achieved the level of prospect wizard. I am offering you the chance to reach the next step and start to learn how to use the power you already have, because I know that you are more than any job. If you decide to do this, I know you can. We all do.” I felt a level of confidence in him from my fellow wizards that surprised me at first, but then I remembered they trusted my instincts completely. *“If he joins us we will have to create a level of telepathic communication far less deep for him to talk to us on. As the council we will need to keep our connection, but it would not be polite to completely exclude him,”* I said to the others, who were

watching intently through me. “Doctor, look around you. All of these books, every last one, is about the power you wield. You will not be left to guess your way through it. We will teach you, not only to practice your art, but also how to use these books for self-growth. We are constantly working on expanding our collection, so with a bit of luck you will never run out of books to study. If you decide to retire, you will be alone. No one will understand you. You will be a stranger among even your own people, but here you have family.”

Suddenly his shoulders squared up and he said, “Master Vydor, I cannot turn down your offer, and I humbly accept.”

I tried to think of a good response to that but my mind was full of six cheering voices. Wait a minute ... *“Kellyn, I thought you were hiding!”*

She giggled and said, *“How could I miss this? Okay, back to hiding for me!”* and she was gone.

The others soon came up to welcome Dr. Rannor to the family. After many pleasantries were exchanged, I offered to call the captain for him.

“Yes, please do. Just now, if you don’t mind, I need rest. I have not slept much since you made your first contact with us earlier this week, and it is catching up on me.”

“Of course, Rannor. Gafar here will show you to the crew quarters where we all stay. These rooms are all shielded from telepathic communication of any kind. If you need anything or anyone while in that room, or want to reach a person in their quarters, you will need to use the mundane intercom system. Outside those rooms we communicate telepathically, and in time you will too,” I said.

Rannor and Gafar left to find him some quarters, and I made my way to a comm station to call the captain. I was not certain how to approach him about this, but Rannor said he had already spoken with him on the subject so maybe it would be a non-event.

“Good evening, Master Vydor,” said the captain. There he went again with the title. Sometimes he used it and sometimes not. I wondered what the difference was.

“Good evening, Captain, I am sorry to disturb you but I have just had a rather interesting chat with Dr. Rannor,” I started.

“Ah yes, he told me he planned to talk to you,” he said.

“What did he tell you?” I asked.

“We talked for a while about his upcoming retirement and how it would have to wait until after this mission. I told him I thought he was too young to retire just yet. He mentioned he wanted to transfer to your crew for the duration of the mission. I explained to him that your ship is considered to be an alien vessel, and there could be no official transfer, but if you allowed it, it would be fine with me,” he said.

“Did he say why he wanted this transfer?” I asked.

“No, not really; just that he felt it was something he had to do. Don’t take this the wrong way, but if an officer does not want to be in his position, I would rather move him to a different position than force him to stay against his will,” he said.

“Well, Captain, that is pretty much what happened here. Dr. Rannor has officially requested to join our nation permanently,” I said.

“He is due for retirement at the end of this week, so while I could demand that he returns to the Empire and serve here, it would also be easy to say he is finishing out his career as an Imperial advisor to Kellyn. Then after he retires he is free to do as he wishes,” said the captain.

I thought for a bit about my response. I could just accept that and say no more, but I felt that would be deceptive. This man was trusting his life and the lives of his entire fleet to my abilities. The least I could do was be completely honest with him. “Captain, it is a bit more complicated than that.”

“How so?” he asked.

“Captain, Dr. Rannor has made it known to me that he is a Magus. This means that he falls under my jurisdiction now, and no longer that of the Empire,” I said.

“Master Vydor, I see what you mean about it becoming more complicated. What exactly does this mean for my doctor?” There he went with the formal title again.

“I offered him a choice. I said he could either finish his present assignment, find a place to retire to in peace, and forget he ever discovered his powers; or he could join us and be trained as a wizard.”

“I am glad to hear you left the choice up to him. I would hate to think you had let your newfound power and position corrupt you. Be ever wary against that, Vydor. The temptation to abuse your power must be far greater than I can imagine and it would be a dark day indeed if you gave into it.” He stopped and sighed. “I know the good doctor too well to think he chose retirement.”

“You are correct, Captain,” I said. I heard his words, but I was more concerned about his warning. There was great truth in it, and I did almost force Rannor’s position. I must always be on guard against that.

“Then the simple way to handle this is to do what I suggested previously and assign him to your crew as an Imperial advisor,” said the captain.

“I must respectfully disagree with that, Captain. I do not want to set up a precedent of sneaking around instead of just handling it straightforwardly. I think the best thing would be for you to grant him retirement a few days early, and then note on his record that he has joined the ranks of the wizards, so that there is no question about his allegiance down the road,” I said.

“Then that is what we will do. Can I speak with him?” he asked.

“Well, I have nothing against it, but he has retired for the evening already. I am sure there will be ample time for you to talk tomorrow either before or after the wedding.”

After that we wrapped up the call. Now, before I went to bed I needed to contact Mantis. We did not have any training material for someone as new to his powers as Rannor. The big question always was whether Mantis would answer the call. We never found a pattern indicating when he was available and when he was not.

Chapter Thirty

There were no doors to the Crystal Room, so I had to teleport in. This was the one exception to our rule against teleporting on the ship. With the lack of discipline about using the exercise room, I wanted everyone to walk as much as possible.

I arrived in the room alone; most of the others were asleep by now and I did not want to bother them. I activated the sphere and waited. I was unsure how much time passed while I waited. I spent it thinking over the day's events and worrying about the next day.

"Hello, Master Vydor," came a distinctive voice from the ball as Mantis' face appeared in it.

"Hello, Mantis, there have been some developments here since we spoke last. I had better fill you in on those first, and then I would like you to send me some training materials for new Magi." I then proceeded to tell him about the situation with Terathan XV, Rannor and the upcoming wedding.

He listened very thoughtfully to everything without any comment or reaction. When I finished he just sat there a moment then said, "Very interesting turn of events." Then he appeared in the room in person and took one of the chairs across from me. "I suppose the first thing I should say is congratulations," he said with a big smile.

"Thank you," I said.

"Vydor, I am a bit worried about you. You and the others are skyrocketing up the ranks of power at a phenomenal rate, and now you are taking on a prospect? I spoke with the Council about your growth and they assured me that this was the way it had to be, so I have said nothing until now. But with Rannor coming on board, I think it is time to address this," he said.

"It does not feel like phenomenal growth. I feel as though we are only little children trying to compete with gods some days," I said.

"All seven of you have surpassed wizards with twenty times your experience; it's just that your perspective is skewed because you only know high-level wizards. For example, look at your fight with Larath. You overpowered him easily, and I know that you have at least tripled your strength since then," he said.

"Overpowered him? Hardly. I crudely bashed him on the head with a fancy stick," I said.

"You see, that is exactly what has me worried. You used a great deal of power and did not even notice it," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, remember the scene Andreyra showed the Emperor in which one of the Seven defeated your Dark Knights; how he stood there completely immune to all the weapon fire around him?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"That was the grandmaster of the sorcerers. He was upset that the Dark Knights were winning that fight. They proved to be far more powerful than the sorcerers had guessed, and if not for his arrival the Dark Knights might have successfully taken control of that colony," he said.

"Really? I had not realized that," I said.

"Yes, but the point is: Did you notice how the grandmaster did nothing to stop the weapon fire, it just had no effect on him? That is what is known as a passive energy field. He was so wrapped up in power that those attacks were insignificant in comparison and were just absorbed," he said.

"That is very impressive, but what does that have to do with Larath?" I asked.

"Larath had a shield up to block you that, had you been a mundane person, would have made him completely invulnerable to your staff blow. He thought he was safe because he did not think you would blast him with your staff because of the risk of hitting the people behind him. But as you approached him, do you remember the look of fear on his face? Yes, I was watching the whole thing take place; it was too important not to. But do you remember the look? As you closed in on him he could see the power building in you. By the time you swung your staff, you had so much power behind that swing that ten Laraths could not have stopped it."

“Surely you cannot be right. I mean, I did not call on my powers, at least I do not think I did.” I was trying to think back to what precisely had happened.

“You see, that is exactly why I am concerned. If you can bring forth that level of power without meaning to, I worry that unintentionally you will start forcing your will on situations when you know you should not. For example, bargaining with the Emperor for a ship,” he said.

“Now wait a minute, Mantis, I know I did not use any power on him, ... ” I began.

“No, you did not. But if you can kill Larath with your powers unintentionally, what is to stop you from unintentionally doing other things?” He just left that comment hanging, and I had no answer to it.

Eventually I said, “Nothing, I suppose.”

“No, not nothing. One bright spot in your news is your marriage to Kellyn. She is a great stabilizer for you. You will have to learn to control this intensity of yours, and turn it into a powerful weapon against the sorcerers. You merely have to accept that it is an issue and decide to fix it. Everything to do with our art centers on willpower, and you have that in great abundance. Make it work for you instead of you working for it,” he said.

I thought about that a long while, and then said, “I understand, and will work on it.”

“Now, about Rannor. That is a most interesting development, and while I do not think you are ready to start training others, you cannot just leave him to himself. Ready or not, you must train him. In this box are all the entry-level books that we use in our schools. Vydor, understand that it will probably take him fifty or sixty years to reach the level you have already reached in your more basic powers. I do not understand why you are all growing so fast in power, but the Council continues to assure me that this is the way it must be,” he said and placed a small box on the table. I knew better than to open it here, as it would be much easier to carry all the books he had somehow stuffed inside it while they were still in that tiny box.

“Well, as long as those materials give us fair expectations for him, however long it takes is however long it takes,” I said.

“As for Terathan XV, this is news to me and I will have to investigate at our end. We might have underestimated their ability to recover from their last loss here; we did not expect them to make a showing for at least another year. I will contact you about that when I know more, but not tomorrow. Tomorrow you need to give completely to Kellyn.” And with that he left. I wondered if I would have a heart attack if he ever actually made an attempt at a goodbye.

I took the box down to the library and left it on an empty shelf to deal with another day. Right now, I needed to get some sleep.

I lay there in my bed a long time just thinking about what Mantis had said. I slowly opened my mind to the power that I had and could see the swirling energy around me. Mantis at one time called me a spellweaver. He also said my natural talent for seeing magic meant I worked directly with the energy in its purest form. While most wizards had to convert the energy into something else to use it, such as fire or electricity, I could weave the power itself.

Something else he had said at that time had not hit home until now. He said that all the grandmasters were spellweavers, and because of it they dominated any battle they were involved in. As I looked at the amount of power that flowed around me, I finally accepted my fate and embraced it. I was truly grandmaster of this realm.

When I did that I felt something shift. It was as if the scales of the universe tipped slightly from darkness towards light. Yes, that was it: the balance of power in this realm had just changed for the better. Hope and confidence welled up inside me as I realized this, and I was finally able to get some sleep.

Chapter Thirty-One

I woke early the next morning and dressed in the full ceremonial robes of my office. I needed to look my best on my wedding day. While I was getting ready a call came over the intercom from Luke, saying that the Dark Talon was incoming, so I told him I would meet them down in bay two.

When I arrived, the bay had just finished pressurizing and the Dark Talon's doors were opening. Twenty-five of the Dark Knights filed out of the craft and into the bay. They lined up at perfect attention as if ready for an inspection. Their commander came towards me and said, "We are honored to take care of the Nevermore for you today."

"Thank you. You will find that most of the ship is fully automated, as there are only seven people on board who can fly her. Feel free to disengage what automation you need to in order to do your job. I do not expect any trouble out here, but should any come, handle what has to be handled and contact me immediately," I said.

"Yes, sir. Did I hear you right that there are only seven people to run this ship and fly her into the potential battle we are about to face?" he asked.

"Yes, there are currently only seven wizards under my command," I said. "I must be going. If I am even a moment late for our rehearsal this morning, well ... let's just say I dare not risk it."

He smiled at that, turned and led his squad out. "*Luke, when they arrive, make for the garden. They will know what to do.*"

"*Okay, Vydor,*" he responded.

Once the captain and the others arrived in their shuttle, I took them down to the gardens. After an exchange of pleasantries Andreyra took charge. I spent the rest of the morning standing where I was told to stand and moving only when instructed.

Kellyn wanted a simple but formal-style wedding. To create this effect, she and Andreyra rearranged the garden so that there was a path from the entrance flanked by various pink and purple flowers that led to a grassy knoll also flanked by flowering bushes and small trees, with a waterfall in the center of the back wall of bushes. It was in front of that waterfall that the captain would marry us. There were no illusions anywhere. Kellyn insisted on a pure ceremony.

When the time finally came for the wedding I took my place in front of the captain and waited for her to come. I felt her presence long before she came into view, but when she did I was almost overwhelmed with emotion. She was dressed in a stunning, pure white gown that was tastefully decorated with pink and clear crystals. She came slowly up the path escorted, to my surprise, by Mantis. Despite, or maybe because of, the lack of magic, the ceremony was a powerful experience.

After the ceremony, Mantis made his typical quick getaway and we all headed over to the Dragon Claw for the reception, which was a whirlwind of handshakes, pats on the back, cheers, music, and food. It was a huge event, orchestrated by the captain's hostess, Carol.

When it was all over Kellyn and I returned to my quarters on the Nevermore ...

Chapter Thirty-Two

Kellyn woke me early the next morning and reminded me that we would be jumping very soon.

"The Dark Knights are still here, so I asked them to handle the jump. I hope you do not mind," she said.

"No, that was a good idea. Where are the others?" As we were still in what was now our quarters, I could not sense them.

"We are meeting on the observation deck for the jump in one hour," she said.

"All right. I will have a shower and go up there," I said. She went back to her previous quarters to get ready herself, and then we went up to the top deck together.

"You know, Vydor, you are very lucky. Not many people get to be woken early the day after their wedding night to face battle with a demon," commented Luke as I arrived. It was a good thing that Kellyn's primary power was healing, because after the look she gave him I was sure he was going to need emergency treatment.

I noticed that Rannor was with us, so I asked, *"Can he hear us yet?"*

"Yes, Master Vydor, I can. Master Gafar is serving as a link for me until I learn how to do this myself," Rannor replied.

"Good. Have you been told what is about to happen?" I asked.

"Only that we will be jumping soon," he said.

"Well, I wish I had more time to explain. I will just say that jumping is dangerous for me at this time and I cannot do it alone. You may see some odd things, but do not worry; united we can handle it," I said. *"Rannor, make sure you have a good physical hold on Gafar and do not let go until the jump is over. We will take care of everything else. Focus on holding on to him while you have a grip on him and it will hold through the jump. Okay?"*

"Yes, Master Vydor, I can do that," he said and grabbed hold of Gafar's arm.

"Commander, we will need the jump countdown up here. I do not have time to explain why, just be aware that we will probably face greater than normal hangover coming back, regardless of our preparations," I said over the comm, taking care to leave it open so that we could hear the countdown as I walked back to the group. Privately to the other master wizards I said, *"I plan to take the offensive this time, so be ready for some fun."*

Then we heard over the speaker, "Jumping in five, four, three, two ..."

The blueness of jump space surrounded us all, and I saw the dark specter moving towards us. This time I looked him right in the eye without fear and said, "Foul creature, beware! I, Grandmaster Vydor, and all six of our realm's masters stand before you. Prepare yourself for battle!" With that I called up a bolt of pure magical energy and blasted him in the dead center of the chest. He screamed out in pain and shrank a little in size, but flew right at me in spite of the blast. I stared him down without blinking, and then raised my left hand, with my wedding ring on it, and channeled the power that I felt coming from Kellyn through the ring and into him. The bolt cut a hole right through him; this time he fell back in intense pain. "Spirit of old, you have no power over me. Your curse on my family ends, NOW!" As I screamed "now" I channeled another bolt, this time combining the powers of all the wizards, and when this bolt hit him he burst into fire and was consumed, leaving only us and the spirit of light.

"Well done, Grandmaster Vydor, you are finally free," the spirit of light said. "Now you must prepare for your greatest battle yet. Take this scroll. It contains vital information that you will need soon. Do not worry about how to read it. When you return to normal space you will have the knowledge contained in it." I took the scroll the spirit offered without pausing to think about it.

Almost instantly after that we were back in normal space, but none of us suffered any side effects from the trip. I looked around at each one, and as they realized what had just happened there was much cheering, jumping and hollering. Once they calmed down, I spoke, using my real voice so that Gafar would not have to relay my words. "Today we united and defeated a demon which has

plagued my family for countless generations. This is a major turning point for us, as it shows our greatest power comes from our unity. We must stand united, since we are the last and greatest defense the forces of light have in this realm. Everything depends on us." I stood in front of them and said, "Soon we will be facing the greatest battle this realm has ever seen. Many will die, perhaps even some of us, but we cannot falter, or sacrifice our dedication to the battle; so I ask you now to repledge your loyalty and dedication to me and our cause."

Starting with Kellyn, one by one, they stated their support with a bow. Then over the loudspeaker I heard the commander of the Dark Knights say, "The Dark Knights will stand with you to the end, Grandmaster Vydor, no matter what happens." It was only then that I remembered I left the comm open before the jump.

"Commander, how many Dark Knights remain on the Dragon Claw?" I asked over the comm.

"None, Grandmaster. All one hundred of us made the journey over yesterday," he said as he entered the room, turning off the comm as he passed it.

"Commander, the Dark Knights' skin is not black because you dyed it; it is because you are a subrace of the Zalionians. Correct?"

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"And your race has a natural ability to communicate through a form of telepathy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he replied.

"Your race also has a natural resistance to magic, has it not?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he answered.

"Well then, I plan to ask the Empire to assign you to my craft indefinitely, if you and your Knights are willing," I said.

"Yes, sir, but there is no need since we have already informed Zalith of our decision to join you here," replied the commander.

"Excellent. Then prepare this ship for the next jump. I expect that we will be jumping into a hot battle zone," I ordered.

"Yes, Grandmaster," he snapped as he turned and left.

"Rest and eat. I must call the captain, then we must have a full council meeting before the next jump. I met with Mantis two nights ago and have much to tell you," I said to the wizards. *"Rannor, I will need you to take your old position in the medical bay, as there are too many of us here now for Kellyn to treat alone."*

He seemed to light up with that comment and asked if he could be excused to check out the medical wing before any battle occurred. *"Go, but be back before the next jump,"* I said.

"Oh, do not worry. After what I just witnessed, I will be back early," he said and left with a spring in his step, looking younger than before. This baffled me until Kellyn sent via our link, *"You gave him a job; he feels needed again."*

"Ah, of course! Thank you, Kellyn. Okay, I am going to call the captain. Feel free to listen in. Just stay out of sight," I said.

I wandered off to find a private-looking nook to place the call from. Kellyn followed me over and set up the call, then returned to the table with the group to eat.

"Master Vydor, I am glad you called," came the captain's greeting. "I need to talk to you about the Dark Knights."

"Go on, Captain," I replied.

"Well, it seems that they are not really Imperial citizens, nor truly part of our Navy," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Yesterday they all started packing up to fly to your ship, and I told them that the first twenty-five was really sufficient. Then they just quoted a treaty reference to me and said, 'The time has come.' I could not get them to stop packing up, and I didn't want to make a fuss on your wedding day, so I let them go.

"I had not heard of this treaty, so I spent most of last night researching it, and I was surprised at what I found. Apparently the Dark Knights were not part of the Zalionian Empire at the time of the

merging with the our Empire. They had a separate agreement. Vydor, this agreement dates back over three thousand years and supersedes anything that would be in effect today.”

Zalith entered the room at this point, but did not say anything. I could see something was eating at him, though. After a brief greeting to Zalith, the captain continued, “This treaty clearly states that they have their own government, and serve the Empire only until the return of the one who will lead them to victory over darkness.”

“I am surprised such a treaty even exists,” I said.

“So was I, and I checked thoroughly. Nothing has been done to change its terms in all this time. It seems the Empire figured enough time had passed that, whoever the ‘one’ was, he was dead and not coming back,” he said.

“This is very interesting, but how does that affect us today?” I was sure I knew what he was going to say, but did not want to jump the gun and insult Zalith if I was way off base.

“Vydor, they believe you are the ‘one’, based on some ancient prophecy,” he replied.

“Somehow I knew you were going to say that. What do you know of this prophecy, Zalith?” I asked.

Zalith seemed relieved to finally be able to speak and said, “Vydor, the prophecy just predicts that you will come, and how we will know you when you come. The first sign is that you will come from a foreign people, but earn respect in battle as one of our own. The second sign is that you will rise up six others from your own people who will follow you without question or hesitation and will also be greatly honored in battle. Once you come into your power you will lead the armies of light into a great battle in a faraway place against the greatest army of darkness ever seen. There is also an obscure reference to beating an ancient power in a place out of time, but I know nothing about that. There are many other signs like these, and they all point to you, Vydor.”

“A demon out of time? Such as in jump space?” I asked.

Zalith’s eyes went wide, “You actually did that?”

“Yes, Zalith, a demon that has hunted my family for countless generations. With the help of my Council of Wizards we were finally victorious, thus ending the disease that has plagued my family almost to extinction,” I answered. Before I said that I would never have thought a Zalionian could go pale, but now I knew better.

“I do not really know what to say in the face of all this. The treaty clearly states they are not under my command, but only serve out of mutual benefit until the ‘one’ ... I guess you ... returns,” said the captain.

“Well, Captain, at least this explains what happened just before I called you,” I said.

“What was that?” he asked.

“Their commander came up here and swore the loyalty of the entire squad to me,” I said.

“Then I guess they are yours now. It really is a wise move. You need a crew on that ship in case we find a battle waiting for us,” he responded.

“Zalith, are you happy with this?” I asked. I could not figure out what he was thinking, but he was obviously greatly torn over something.

“Vydor, not only am I happy about it, I am proud of them for following through on an ancient promise. I almost wish I could join them,” he said. “All Zalionians hold dearly to that prophecy.”

I thought about it for a minute, then said, “Zalith, I need you on the Dragon Claw as my official representative and to take care of the Zalionians who are still part of the fleet. The Empire needs our help, and I need you to spearhead it in the Navy.”

He smiled and said, “It will be a great honor to serve you in that way, thank you.”

The captain looked at me and said, “You are turning out to be a great leader, Vydor. I am proud of you.”

“Thank you, Captain, but we have more business to attend to. I have just learned that we will be jumping into a hot battle zone. The sorcerers are amassing their forces and plan to strike now before we have time to raise up an army of wizards to face them. Are there any fleets nearby that you can call on for help?” I asked.

“The Phantom’s fleet could probably make it in about twelve hours. They are the closest,” he said.

“We do not have the time to wait for them. Let them meet us at the battle. If they arrive after the fight starts, that could work to our advantage,” I said.

“I agree. If the sorcerers are still gathering power then we dare not let them have any more time than we have to. I will also shorten our jump a little so that we have some extra time to recover from the jump before rushing in,” he said.

“Captain, you must understand that everything is at stake here. Call in all who can make it. If the battle drags on long enough for them to reach us we will definitely need them,” I said.

“I will have to delay our jump, probably by an hour, so that we can prepare the fleet for this. Do not worry, Vydor, we will win, no matter what they bring against us. I have never lost a battle or war yet, and I do not plan to start now.”

With that I wrapped up the conversation and called all the wizards to meet me in the Crystal Room. Once inside we each took our official positions, and I said, *“There is much to discuss. You heard some of it when I spoke to the captain, but there is more you must know. First, let me give you my memory of the meeting with Mantis.”*

I looked around at each of them as they reviewed it. Long gone was the ragged-looking group that I had found last year. They no longer bore the effects of the stress of constantly hiding and fighting underground for months at a time. They all looked strong and vibrant now. The power each of them radiated was immense. Soon they had absorbed the memory and were waiting for me to talk.

“I have learned much since then. You heard some of it during my chat with the captain, so let me go back and fill in the details. I will start with the identity of the dark specter that we just defeated; he was the embodiment of a curse cast on my family line by the very first grandmaster sorcerer in the hope of preventing my birth. His power came from my anger and fear, and his destruction was brought about by your love and support.”

“So then, he is gone for good?” piped up Kellyn.

“Yes, Kellyn, we won.” I responded. That brought great joy to the room. It was our first great victory as wizards, and there was nothing like complete and total victory to cheer a team. Once the room was settled again I continued, *“There is a lot more to cover, starting with what I was shown about the future. When we come out of the next jump the largest army of darkness ever created will meet us. It will be made up almost entirely of spirits, demons and other creatures from the darkest and foulest abyss. This massive fleet will be outnumbered almost three to one.”*

I just let that settle in for a minute. No one said anything while they visualized what that might look like. Then I continued with the bad news. *“I foresee a death toll amongst the forces of light greater than that of any previous war in the entire realm. I cannot see who will live and who will die. You may or may not want to believe in the prophecy that Zalith told us about, but the key is that our enemy does believe it, and they believe I am the one to fulfill it. Their plan is to wipe us out before we can reach full power.”*

“Vydor, do we have the power to face them yet?” asked Andreyia.

“The army of darkness we can handle. The lower-ranked sorcerers, regardless of their numbers, we can handle. But any one of the Seven is more than a match for us,” I said.

“Then how can we fight them?” asked Luke.

“Well, we have two major advantages in this war that offer us a chance, if we exploit them to their fullest. The first is the battlefield itself. This is interstellar space; this is where the Imperial Navy is at its most powerful, and it is a completely alien terrain to the sorcerers. As far as I can tell, they have only fought wars on planetary surfaces before. What we will see when we come out of the jump is a large army surrounding a lone space station. All the sorcerers will be on that station.”

“Destroy the summoner, and you remove the summoned,” commented Darnath.

“Exactly. The key to this fight will be that station. And you can be sure they know that. I fully expect the Seven to be on that station,” I said.

“But how do we beat them?” asked Gafar. “If they are greater than us, then that station is safe, and we lose.”

“No, they are not greater than us, but any one of them can defeat any one of us. You see, our second advantage is our ability to combine our powers. To do that you need a tremendous level of trust and loyalty,” I said.

“Something sorcerers are not known for,” said Kellyn.

“Yes, and when we combine our powers the result is far greater than the sum of the parts. No single one of them can match our combined power, just as the dark specter could not.”

“What of the weapon?” asked Gafar.

“I have found the weapon, and the funny thing is, I have known where it was all along,” I said.

“You are the weapon they were looking for,” stated Kellyn.

“Not just me, but all of us. They were trying to destroy me and prevent the creation of this Council before we discovered our powers. They foresaw our coming and they knew they could not match two Councils of Wizards, so they are moving pre-emptively to secure a victory,” I said.

I looked around the room, meeting each of their eyes and said, *“This fight we are about to face seems daunting now, but each of you must remember that we are their worst fear. They are assembling all this power because they know their time is short, and that we come in great power to fight them. They are far more afraid of us than we are of them.”*

“Vydor, did that other spirit tell you all this?” asked Kellyn.

“Some of it, and some I finally figured out. I also know who he is now; he is the same man from the history that Mantis told us, the one who raised up the twelve wizards to fight the sorcerers the first time,” I said.

“What else do we know about him?” asked Luke.

“Nothing, but that book back in my room is connected to him. I do not know how yet. Later, when we have peace again, I will take the time to read it, but now our main task is to prepare for this war. I plan to summon Mantis and see if they can spare any wizards to help us here.”

“Brilliant! Since they are amassing here in great numbers, they must be pulling forces from Mantis’ realm to use here,” said Kellyn.

“That is the hope,” I said. I then turned to the ball and summoned Mantis, for the first time using my full authority as grandmaster to command his appearance instead of merely requesting a chat.

He answered the call fairly quickly and appeared in a purple puff of smoke. When he saw me, he stopped and bowed and said, *“Greetings, Grandmaster Vydor, what can I do for you?”*

“Mantis, war is upon us. I have foreseen the army we are about to face and it is a great gathering of darkness, greater than has ever amassed before. The sorcerers are making their move now on this realm, and using all their might.”

He looked surprised at my statement and said, *“Then they have found the weapon?”*

“No, Mantis, you did. But it was not a weapon; it was this Council. They knew that if we were created they could not face both of us. They wished to strike us down before we ever got up,” I replied.

“Vydor, you have grown tremendously since last we met, but how can you know this?” he asked.

“I have met with the same man of light that you told of in your history lesson, and he revealed much to me, and opened my eyes to what I already knew,” I said.

The look of surprise that passed over his face was priceless; I had never had the edge on him before, and would have enjoyed it if not for the desperate times we faced. *“Mantis, I have summoned you here to formally request any assistance your realm can provide. Even if it is just a handful of apprentices to scatter through our armies, anything would be of great help. We fully expect to fight the Seven in this battle and will not be able to lend our power to help the Imperial Navy.”*

He slumped his shoulders and said, *“I am sorry, but we cannot help at this time. In fact, I was instructed to ask you for help; it seems they are making a move in both of our realms. Our forces are already committed to battle. I do not know where they suddenly got the numbers from to achieve this, but it seems they are calling our bluff on the two-front war.”*

“And they only need to win one to take it all,” I said.

“That is why you must not lose. You must bring everything you can to this fight. Both our realms depend on it.” He paused and looked around the room before continuing. “You are by far the best students I have ever seen. I have faith in your ability to win this. No matter how big their armies are, there are still only seven master-level sorcerers, and we have fourteen now. They will have to choose a place to make their stand, and it is likely to be here because they will underestimate the power you have acquired. When that happens, their power in our realm will dip considerably and we should be able to win on our front and then send reinforcements here, if you have not won already.”

“So we really just need to keep them busy once they arrive,” said Kellyn.

“I fear help will not be able to reach us in time. If we see the enemy, we must engage them to the fullest,” I said.

“Yes, Vydor is right. If they know you are stalling they will exploit that to their own advantage. Now, Grandmaster, with your permission I need to bring this news back to my realm and rejoin the fight,” said Mantis.

“Go forth, Mantis, and I expect to see you at the victory party,” I said. He smiled, winked and disappeared.

“*So we are on our own,*” said Luke.

“*No, we are not. Not only do we have the seven most powerful wizards in the realm here, but we are also backed by the might of the most powerful military in history. We will win this so long as we continue to stand together and not waver,*” said Kellyn.

“*Well said, Kellyn. Do not forget they are used to fighting against men on horseback wielding swords, not massive battleships, destroyers and particle weapons. The only advantage they have is in numbers; the rest favors us. We will be victorious!*” I said.

“*Now, we are running out of time before we will be jumping into the battle and I must meet with the captain and discuss our fight plan, so unless there are any questions I am going to adjourn this meeting.*” No one spoke, so I closed the meeting and we returned to the observation lounge.

“Commander, please come to the observation lounge for pre-battle briefing,” I said over the comm.

When he arrived I said, “Commander, when we come out of the jump we need to be in full stealth mode. We will not be joining the opening moves of the battle. Once the two armies are locked in battle we will move to hit their primary center of command. It is a space station that will be in the center of their forces. I want you to lead three groups of Dark Knights to penetrate and conquer the station. Once your men are on the station and actively fighting, I will send in the Council of Wizards and then follow to open a fourth front inside the station. Control of that station is key to this battle. Each sorcerer killed there will weaken the forces outside the station, and if we kill their leaders their whole army falls apart,” I ordered.

“It is a wise plan, Grandmaster, and we will gladly give our lives for it,” he said.

“Thank you, Commander. Go and prepare your men. Once our time to fight is at hand, speed of execution will be critical.” As he left to carry out my orders I went over to my comm station to call the captain. Kellyn came over and set up the call for me, then took a seat beside me.

“Hello, Master Vydor,” the captain said as he appeared on the screen. With him were several important officers, including Zalith.

“Pardon me, Captain, but his proper title is Grandmaster Vydor,” interrupted Kellyn.

“My apologies, Master Kellyn. I will make a note of that,” said the captain.

“Captain, I am aware that we do not have a lot of time, but we need to go over the battle plans before we jump,” I said.

“Definitely. We have been expecting your call. Since you know the enemy best, why don’t you tell us what you have in mind?” he replied

“Master Andreyra, I need you,” I said, speaking aloud for everyone’s benefit. When she came over I asked her to show them a vision I had in my mind of the upcoming battlefield.

“As you can see, there is a large force waiting for us, grouped around that station. That station is key to our victory,” I said. “What I will need your forces to do is to engage their fleet with everything you have.”

“If the station is the key, it would make more sense to push through and destroy that,” said one of the officers.

“In a normal battle, yes, it would, but in this case that would grant them victory. That station is invulnerable to any attack this fleet can muster, but that is where we come in. Once you have them fully engaged, we will move on the station. You must keep their military engaged so that we can get on the station and take control.”

“What of their powers?” asked Zalith.

“Their powers will be tied up in creating and controlling the army that you fight. That is why you must keep them engaged. Once we are on the station they will have to start dividing their power between controlling their forces and fighting us, and you will start to see sections of their forces fall apart. It is important that you keep up the pressure on them so that they cannot bring their full strength to bear against us. If either your fleet or our men have to face their full might alone we will lose. It is only through this joint attack that we can overcome them.” I paused there for a moment, and memories of the first squad of Dark Knights I ever led came rushing back to me. “If something happens, and there is an opening in the shields on that station, you must destroy it regardless of who may still be on it.”

“Your plan sounds wise, Vydor. What can we expect to be fighting?” asked the captain. I knew that I could trust him to follow through with that order. He would not like it, but he would not hesitate. He had too much combat experience to do otherwise.

“Master Andreyra, please show them this,” said Kellyn as she started mentally picturing all kinds of horrid creatures. As they were being displayed one by one to them, she said, “They are immune to most physical attacks, but your energy and particle weapons will work well. Many of them will have shields around them, but they can be overpowered. Just keep increasing your focus fire until you break through. I am just showing you a sample of the kinds of beings they have available to bring to bear, but they can all be defeated the same way. You just need to overwhelm their defenses by coordinating your attacks. Their primary weapons will all look very different, but in the end they are all pure energy-based attacks, so your defenses should be structured to take that into account.” Then she privately said to me, “*I guess all that time spent in the library studying demons while trying to find your demon wasn't wasted after all.*”

“Do you have this data in a form we can load into our computers and share with the fleet?” asked Zalith.

“No, it is all in real books at present. If we had a couple of months to transcribe them, maybe, but we do not,” answered Kellyn.

“Captain, as far as I know they have only fought wars on planetary surfaces before this, so the battlefield strongly favors us,” I said. “Have you been able to call in any help?”

“We have two more fleets arriving. The first should arrive about four hours after the battle starts, and the second should arrive about two hours later. Combined, they will almost double our numbers,” he said.

“Excellent. At present I estimate their numbers to be about three times greater than the Dragon Claw's fleet,” I said.

“Grandmaster Vydor, it sounds like you have thought of everything that could be thought of before the battle. If I understand you right, these things we will be fighting cannot function without their masters, and you will be attempting to eliminate their masters, while we kill the ... things,” he said.

“Yes, Captain, that is it exactly,” I said.

“Then we will spread the plan to the ships, and jump in one hour. Good luck,” he said and signed off.

Chapter Thirty-Three

We gathered around for the trip through jump space, this time knowing that it was not what was in jump space that we had to worry about, but what was on the other side. As the blueness of it wrapped around us I looked for the spirit of light that had been following us, and he was there in his customary place, smiling and looking friendly. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Keep following the narrow path of light, and you will find me," was his answer.

We again came out of the jump with no post-jump effects; apparently we had grown enough in our powers to move in and out of jump space without issue. As soon as we returned to normal space I took out a scroll which I had created some time ago. I opened and read from it. As I read each word the scroll started to burn up, and when I was finished the scroll was completely consumed. In its destruction it released a powerful concealment spell that would wrap our ship in a cloak of invisibility which not even the Council of Sorcerers could penetrate. This would guarantee that we could attack on our timing and terms, not theirs.

I switched the view mode on our observation deck viewing screens to show tactical information about the battlefield. I saw the Dragon Claw and her fleet slipping into a very standard attack formation that appeared to be focused on the station.

On the other side I saw a huge army of demons, spirits, and other foul creatures that had somehow created spiritual spacecraft to fight in. When they saw the fleet they began to redeploy to counter the attack formation they saw.

"Vydor, it looks like he plans to attack the station. He must have decided not to follow your plan," said Darnath.

"Studying the captain's battle strategies was a required course in the Academy. His plans are the best I have ever seen. He knows exactly what he is doing, and he knows that we are dependent on him to handle his part of the plan. I suspect that he will bring some firepower against the station in order to help hide the fact that they are not attacking the station directly," I said.

As the enemy redeployed the captain rearranged his fleet, this time into an inverted crescent. When the sorcerers saw this, they moved their forces again. Back and forth went the dance for a while. *"He is stalling,"* I said to the others.

"Why?" asked Kellyn.

"Well, if I know him as well as I think I do, he plans to attack about one hour before the first of our reinforcements arrive. Look at all the patterns he is using. They are not random, they are carefully chosen to test the speed and mobility of the enemy, as they constantly have to move to adapt. The sorcerers continue to focus their positions on perceived weaknesses in the captain's formations, and since they are focusing heavily this is constantly opening large weaknesses in their own lines. Their inexperience is showing and the captain is using that to his utmost advantage," I said.

While watching the dance, I heard the captain speak a single word over the intership communication link: "Deploy." That was all that was needed. Suddenly all the large ships moved to the back of the line and the smaller attack vessels moved to the front. The fleet then arranged its pattern into a very solid and aggressive attack formation. I knew this one well. It was the subject of one of my papers at the Academy. Once the ships were arranged he issued another one-word order: "Launch."

Suddenly Ravens, Falcons, and all other kinds of craft started launching from the larger ships. Everything from single-pilot fighters up to the biggest war vessels that could be carried in a ship's bay was launched. They all moved out to form a line in front of the fleet, and it was an impressive show of force.

I felt fear coming from the enemy as the captain skillfully moved the final pieces of his attack plan into place. The enemy's forces pulled back into a tighter, more defensive stance. Memories of a speech the captain gave to my class came back to me. In that speech he explained that he was never in it for the long run. A battle is won by bringing your full might to bear all at once in the opening move.

He went on to say that anyone who has a long-term plan for a battle is a loser and a failure. His record backed up his boast; he never lost.

Then the final order came: "Attack." And the entire fleet moved forward with every weapon firing. As they did, I felt Kellyn cast her power over the fleet twice. The first time was a protection magic of some kind. It bolstered their resistance to spiritual and magical attacks. The second one increased the power of their weapons against spiritual creatures. Somehow, with those two spells she increased the overall power of the fleet by twenty-five per cent.

"Commander, move us in close to the station and hold us there. Time your men's entry on to the station to coincide with the second fleet's arrival," I said via the comm.

"Yes, Grandmaster," he said.

The Dark Knights were already aboard their three ships, and the bays were already depressurized. They were very anxious to bring the fight back to those who had killed their squadmates. I could sense the eagerness and anticipation emanating from them.

Around us the battle raged on. The captain was using a lot of different methods at once to attack the creatures, most probably trying to determine which was most effective. "*The fools think they are fighting on the ground,*" I commented, as I noticed the enemy formation was fairly linear. The captain must have noticed this too, because he forced his own formation to match.

Any ensign looking at the battle would have been baffled at the captain's arrangement, and screaming for him to take advantage of the enemy's weak formation, but they would have been wrong. Right on schedule, the second fleet came out of jump space, not behind the enemy, but on a plane perpendicular to the captain's attack, catching the enemy completely off guard.

Although every one of their crew would have been out of commission for a while after the jump, the ship's computers were already linked to the Dragon Claw's and they automatically began targeting and firing all weapons. Once the crew recovered from the jump they would take over control.

I checked the station on our tactical monitors and I saw the Dark Knights already punching a hole through the outer layer of the station and pouring in. Excellent, so far all was going as planned. I turned my attention back to the battle, and the second fleet had begun deploying their fighters and smaller craft. The enemy still greatly outnumbered us, but the numbers were much closer now. I felt Kellyn cast her beneficial magic on the second fleet and they, too, grew in power.

"*Everyone, prepare for our attack on the station. This is how I want it to go. You will break up into groups of two and each pair of you will drop in to assist one of the Dark Knight squads. You will be facing mostly lower-level sorcerers at that point, and you should have no problem. Once the six of you are fully engaged I will land on the station to hunt their primary control group. Our presence there will do one of two things. It will either grant us victory, or draw out the Seven. Since they think we are still too weak to beat them, I am counting on it drawing them out. When that happens, all come to me and we will stand against them. If in our attack we end up weakening the shields enough for the fleet to destroy the station, then everyone huddle close to Darnath and he will shield us until we can jump out of there.*" Each of them indicated that they understood, then I said, "*It is time,*" and they all disappeared.

Via our link I was able to track their movements. As they hit the station I saw a chunk of the enemy spirits disappear from the army. Good, we got their attention. I waited back on the Nevermore. I knew that my entry into the battle would have a drastic impact on the outcome and I wanted to time it for maximum impact.

All three groups of Dark Knights were pinned down under heavy fire from what appeared to be a mix of journeyman and apprentice sorcerers. I watched as Kellyn and Jerran joined the first group. Kellyn got right to work healing the wounded, while Jerran took a moment to evaluate the battle. Soon he stood up and created a wall of fire between the two forces. Then with a push from his hand the wall went traveling towards the sorcerers with great speed. They tried to turn and run but were too late and the fire consumed them.

Luke and Gafar were with the second group and I looked over just in time to see something I had not expected to see on a space station. A dark cloud had formed over the sorcerers' heads, and then suddenly lightening rained down from the clouds and completely wiped out the enemy position.

When I looked over to Andreyra and Darnath's group I saw that Darnath had summoned creatures made of pure stone that were mercilessly pounding the sorcerers.

Outside the station, the third fleet arrived. It was the Crusader and her support fleet. She was an older ship with a smaller fleet, but it still gave the Navy forces a boost in number of about twenty-five per cent.

Back on the station, Kellyn and Jerran's group met up with an elite sorcerer, much more powerful than what they had fought before. He chanted a command and slashed his hand through the air, leaving a blade-like arc of energy behind, which flew at Jerran. Jerran was undaunted and blocked it with his staff, then fired a blast from his staff in return. The blast hit the elite sorcerer square in the chest, but had no effect.

"Fools, you are mere children to me, now die!" he shouted at them and began to weave a deadly spell.

Then Kellyn jumped to Jerran's side and said, "I do not think so!" and placed her hand on Jerran's shoulder. Jerran grinned, and with their powers combined he blasted the sorcerer again, this time ripping through his shields and killing him.

Then across the station Andreyra and Darnath's group came across a group of three elite sorcerers. I became very worried, as I knew they would be no match for three, but before I could go to them, I appeared in the corridor. This sent the enemy sorcerers into full retreat. I laughed as I realized that Andreyra had tricked them.

I judged the time had come for me to join the battle. Soon the enemy would begin assembling their elite sorcerers to bring against my wizards, and that would turn the tide of battle back in their favor. I scanned the station and found what I was looking for: a group of elite sorcerers completely focused on the war outside the station. They were in a shielded room in a remote arm of the station.

Before leaving I sent Rannor instructions on where to find the box of training materials, just in case he was the only survivor. I stressed to him the importance of carrying on no matter what happened. Then I wrapped myself in power and teleported directly to the elite sorcerers that I had found, easily passing through their defenses.

When I appeared they were sitting at a table with crystal balls in front of each so that they could see the battlefield. They gasped as they looked towards me, but it was too late for them. I chanted a spell and traced an arc through the air. Behind my finger leapt out a bright arc of energy that pounded into their group, sending them all flying into the wall. Before they could recover I spread out my fingers and sent a wave of energy bolts into their group, killing them all. Outside the station I knew another large chunk of the enemy had just been wiped out.

I walked out into the hall from that room and a group of sorcerers was waiting for me. They opened fire with their wands and staves as soon as they saw me. Undaunted, I turned to face them, their bolts having no effect as they were completely absorbed by the energy I had around me. The scene reminded me of the battle back on Arken IV between my first squad of Dark Knights and the sorcerers, but there was a distinct difference. Unlike the Dark Knights, who stood their ground when facing the overwhelming power of the grandmaster sorcerer, these pathetic excuses for Magi were pale with fear at the sight of a grandmaster wizard, and as I looked them over they were turning to run.

I lowered my staff and fired a single bolt into their group that ripped right through them and put a large hole in the side of the station, sucking any possible survivors out.

Air rushed by me, leaving through the hole I had made, but my shielding held and I was unaffected. I reached out with my power and crushed the passageway, sealing the hole completely. "*Someone please remind me not to cheat at chess with him any more,*" said Luke via our connection.

I began looking for another group of elites, and soon I found them. This time they were ready for me when I arrived. They greeted me with a large number of summoned creatures that instantly leaped to attack as I appeared. I quickly spun my staff to an upright orientation and slammed the butt of

it into the floor. A crack appeared where I had hit the floor and spread in both directions. Soon the room broke in half, and the rush of air out into space pushed the sections apart and sucked out all my enemies to their death. The sorcerers did not yet understand the dangers of fighting in a space station and this group never would. Across the entire station the enemy was in full retreat.

With half the room gone I could look out over the battle that was raging outside the station. The captain had moved the fleets so that they completely surrounded the enemy in a sphere of death. All weapons on all vessels were firing at once. The bolts came so thickly and fast that they looked like solid sheets of destruction.

As I watched the battle rage on, a lesson from the Academy came back to my mind. The professor was trying to get across how big the universe was and he said, "Even if all the ships in the fleet were to join in battle and fire all their weapons at once, the amount of power they generated would be so minuscule on the universe's scale that it would not even be noticed." Now that I could see such an example first-hand, I was in awe of the majesty of the universe.

I noticed that the Dragon Claw was in trouble. She was beset by a very large number of enemies determined to destroy her. I reached out with my power and slammed the group of demons with a fist of pure power. With that single blow I wiped out the entire force attacking the Dragon Claw. It was then I began to truly understand the power that I wielded. To think that not much more than a year ago I was worried about looking good enough to keep my job, and now I stood in the hard, cold vacuum of space wielding a level of power that made the Dragon Claw look like a toy. That must be the most terrifying thought of my life.

The Imperial Navy continued to push hard towards the station, its shield glowing from all the hits it was taking. Inside, the Dark Knights and wizards continued to keep the enemy on the run. On every front it seemed the battle was ours.

Then I felt a shift in the balance of power, and not in a good direction. The shields on the station suddenly got stronger. The sorcerers rallied in defense and the fleet began to be pushed back.

"Finally they come," I said, moving to a larger room on the station. I reached out to the commander of the Dark Knights and said, *"Pull your men out, and do all you can to destroy the station from the outside. Should we fall, guard Rannor with your lives, as he will be our last hope."*

I waited in the large room, gathering all the power I could from the battle around me. Then he appeared. He was an old man with a sunken, almost skeletal-looking face; there was more bone about him than skin. By the power he commanded I knew he could only be the grandmaster sorcerer. The room literally crackled with his energy and the walls seemed to retreat in fear. There would be no simple defeat of him like I had used against others of his army. His shielding was far greater than mine.

"So we meet at last, foul one," I said. I stood proud and strong with the full authority of my position and said, "Leave this realm now if you wish to survive this day, and never return."

That failed to shake his confidence at all; he had utterly no fear of me. He smiled and said, "This day shall mark the end of the era of wizards and a return to the time of sorcery."

Then one by one each of the six wizards stepped forward out of a concealing shield I had put up, and collectively said, "Not today, and not ever."

"Good, I will kill you all with one fell swoop." And he attacked with all his might.

Had I stood alone I would have been completely and utterly overwhelmed by his opening attack, but with the unified power behind me I was able not only to resist, but to send a counter-attack. We struggled back and forth with magical attacks and defenses flying all around us, neither making headway for a long time.

Anyone watching the fight from outside would have seen some amazing things. The station itself twisted and bent and stretched as if a great monster was inside it trying to escape. Then, in a brilliant flash of light, the station ruptured, spewing debris in all directions. The destruction of the station wiped out the remaining sorcerers and their summoned armies at once, but the battle between light and dark carried on without them.

When the flash finally cleared, two great beings in a death match could be seen. One was pure black; so black that the mind had a hard time registering him, and if not for the contrast with the other

he could not have been seen. The other being was pure light, so bright that it should have been blinding to look at, but there was an odd quality about the light that made it almost comforting to see.

Looking closely at the being of light, he only had one face, but in some strange and odd way seven distinct faces could be seen in that one face, each concentrating fully on the being of darkness. The seven faces each resembled one of the great wizards, but were somehow perfected. This was what they would have looked like in a perfect universe free of evil and darkness.

The two great beings were locked in the exact same stance, perfect mirrors of each other. The look on their faces was one of pure concentration and control. Each had both his hands forward, held in a claw-like shape, with the right hand slightly forward of the left. From the great wizard's right hand came a beam of pure light that the great sorcerer was blocking with his left hand, and from the great sorcerer's right hand came a beam of pure darkness that the great wizard was blocking with his left hand.

While all this was going on, none of us noticed that the station was destroyed; we just kept fighting there in the hard, cold vacuum of space. We just kept at him, all our powers combined as one pouring into his defenses, and doing all we could to survive long enough to outlast his shields.

Then the unexpected happened. A bolt of energy came in and hit the old sorcerer, then another, and another. Soon there were hundreds upon hundreds of bolts of energy pelting him, overpowering his defenses and utterly destroying him.

The seven of us stood there floating in the hard vacuum and looked around to see what was left of the three fleets arrayed around us. I saw the Dragon Claw, heavily damaged, but intact and I teleported our group to the command deck.

Upon arriving I saw the captain in his chair, and he stood and said, "Sorry to break up your party, but it was getting awful stagnant." I realized what had happened. When the station was destroyed, the summoned army must have been wiped out. That freed up the Imperial forces and he brought them to bear against the old sorcerer. Even he could not stop that much power.

I reached out and cast my voice on every ship that was left while Andreyra put my image on every screen. I simply said, "This day we stood united, and have claimed victory over the greatest power of darkness ever to be gathered together." This brought cheers and much joy to the men, but I could not share in it. The burden of the death toll was too great to bear. I did not want to know the numbers; seeing the remains of the battle was enough.

The captain walked over to me, put his hand on my shoulder and locked eyes with me. "Vydor, I said you would be a great leader one day, and today you proved it. Forget not the price we paid this day, but do not let it burden you. Everyone who came to this battle knew it could be their last, but they were willing to stand and fight for the vision you created. Today you led the combined forces of wizards and men to fight a foul disease that could have destroyed everything we stand for, and you did it well. Focus on the victory, not the cost."

"Thank you, Captain. I must go contact Mantis and see where the other six master sorcerers are," I said.

"Which did we kill?" he asked.

"The grandmaster," I said with a grin I did not truly feel. Then all the wizards and I returned to the Nevermore, and the Crystal Room. As we entered the room a call was coming in from Mantis. "Come," I said in reply.

He appeared looking tired and battle-worn. Kellyn quickly gave up her chair for him. I was sure we looked just as bad as he did. I surely felt like it.

Once he settled in I said, "We have defeated the grandmaster."

This brought a light to his eyes and a smile to his face. "That explains their retreat in our realm."

"So you are victorious there?" I asked.

"Yes, apparently thanks to you. We were very hard-pressed, and faced overwhelming odds. I do not know how they raised such a huge army so quickly. We fought with everything we could. Our only hope was that we could hold on long enough for you to win here and send help to us. We managed to

lock them in a stalemate, and suddenly their numbers starting dropping off, and their power started to fail. We moved to take advantage of this weakness and started to regain some lost ground. It was not long after that they withdrew completely from the battlefield,” he said.

“Any idea where the other six are?” I asked.

“No. They were with the forces that retreated. They must have stayed in our realm to keep us busy, believing their grandmaster could take you alone,” he said. “I must say, I am very impressed you were able to take him.”

“We could not have done so alone. We were locked in a stalemate with him for a long time; how long I do not know. The stalemate ended when every ship we had left turned its power on him, and our united attack was far too great for even him,” I said.

“Amazing. Simply amazing, that in the end it was the mundanes who won the greatest war ever fought between sorcerers and wizards,” he said. “With your leave, I must return to my realm and bring them this information.”

“Yes, go, but be sure to keep in touch, as we have only pushed back the darkness. It is not yet defeated,” I replied.

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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 spread the word about them and please post a review to whatever store you purchased this book from. As an independent author, word of mouth is the only marketing I can afford. Thanks!

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