

In Service to the Emperor

Part I

by John Doucette

It was a peaceful night. There wasn't a cloud in the moonless sky. The stars could be seen in beautiful clarity. The wheat in the mountain meadow swayed gently in the breeze. Fifty-four armoured figures crouched among the wheat, their massiveness only partially hidden. One of the figures stood, looking off to the north.

Inside his two meter tall suit of powered armour, Lieutenant Valen Kryor of the Imperial Marines scanned the northern horizon. His sensors showed nothing out of the ordinary. A quick glance at the terrain map on his Heads-Up Display showed that the meadow petered out five hundred meters ahead where it joined with the foothills that

sloped gently down to the plain below.

A bit of luck on our part, he thought. According to the briefing, his target was in a very mountainous region. We should be able to make good time tonight, he thought. "Sergeant Yres," he said into his throat mike, "final equipment check. Make sure the men go over everything. Better that we find a problem now than later."

"Yes, sir," came Yres's reply. Kryor detected movement to his right as Yres moved off among the

men, making sure that all equipment was at full readiness. As Kryor performed his own equipment check, his thoughts strayed to the mission.

A year ago, the Valusian Star Empire had contacted what appeared to be a major star-faring nation near the rim of the galaxy. What was more, this nation was dominated by humans. The Empire's scholars were shocked; as far as they knew, no Valusians had gone this far out as yet. Of course, many records had been lost during the Dreknor Invasion three and a half centuries ago, so

it stood to reason that these humans could be Valusian descendants.

Naturally, the Emperor was pleased to hear of this development; the added economic and military might of this "lost colony" would strengthen the Empire immensely. When the emissaries sent to re-establish contact with the colony arrived at a major world near the Empire's border, they were immediately taken prisoner. This was understandable. After three hundred and fifty years without contact, how were the colonists to know that the emissaries weren't Dreknor spies. The emissaries were soon taken to the colony's capital, a blue-white world orbiting a G2 star the colonists called Sol; the planet was named Terra.

Matters were soon straightened out, and the emissaries began preparations to re-establish Imperial administration over what they thought was a rather large colony. It was then that the emissaries were politely informed that the "colony" was not a colony at all, but a sovereign nation named the Terran League, that the Terrans didn't know who the Valusians were, and that while it was quite evident that both "races" were human, *Homo sapiens*, as the Terrans were known, originated on Terra.

The Valusians were shocked, to put it mildly. They requested some time to think over what had just been learned, and spent the next several weeks enjoying the Terrans' hospitality and in heated debate about what should be done. In the end, they decided to try to carry out their original mission; to incorporate this area of space into the Empire. They presented their case to the League Parliament most eloquently. They were informed that Parliament would have to debate the issue and that it would be some time before Parliament would have an answer. The emissaries left star charts and other relevant data with the Terrans, boarded their jumpship, and left for Valus to report to the Emperor.

After debating the issue for close to nine months, Parliament had an answer for the Valusians. Thank you very much, but no. The League would be interested in entering into discussions concerning an alliance, however.

It was at this time that several high-ranking naval officers protested the Emperor's policy of benevolent contact toward the Terran League. In other words, they staged a very bloody and very successful coup. The new Emperor, Emperor Hsian I, was the former Grand Admiral of the



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