

CHAPTER 1

A Dire Battle in Deep Space

I don't know why I took this job. The pay and benefits I guess. I did consider that it might be bad for my soul at the time, but needing to eat and pay bills overruled my wisdom. They offered me a lot of money plus the medical coverage I needed. I thought I could handle it. But it was days like this that made me want to quit.

The mother mouse held onto her child with her teeth, desperately fighting my giant fingers from pulling the baby out of the tiny cage. I could see the intelligence of the mother in her sad, frightened eyes, struggling to use enough pressure to reclaim her offspring while not injuring it in the process. Much worse, however, was the thought I could read in those eyes.

Please don't take my baby!

By the time I got the pinky away from mom, I was in tears. I'm an empathic, sensitive man. And I hate this job. It's just evil. I tried convincing myself it was just a mouse. They are just animals. I was imagining things.

No. She had been pleading with me.

My name is Jared Jacobson. I work for a lab, which works for a corporation, which works for big pharmaceuticals. The whole thing is about experimenting on animals to make treatments (not cures, mind you) for ailments of humanity and make trillions. They pay me very well, even though I'm not one of the doctors. I just take care of the animals. That's my job. Take care of them, and fetch one when the doctors call for it so that can subject them to horrible, inhuman research in the name of medicine.

When I'm not fetching them or disposing of their bodies, I do my best to take care of them. I really do. I feed them, clean their way-too-small cages, and play with them when I can. I tried giving them wheels and toys, but the regulations wouldn't permit it. They made me remove them.

"Jared," the head doctor said, "We all understand how you feel about them. We don't like it either. It's a necessary evil. We can't experiment on humans."

Can't you? I can think of some humans who could use that lesson. No, no... that's bad thinking. I know better than that. I need to control that.

But I know better than taking a baby away from its mama too, don't I?

I handed the baby over to the docs. I didn't want to know what they were going to do to it today. I'd seen too many horrors working there for just over a year.

I did my job and went home depressed. I can't go into pet stores anymore. I ran an animal rescue for years, a while back. I love animals. That's why I took the job initially. I was living in my car after a long bout of being seriously ill. My friend, a doctor, offered me the deal. It paid well, had full benefits (which I desperately needed) and had flexible hours. I mostly work at night. No one told me the unpleasant details.

I noticed a trend — that as many people climb up the social ladder, their souls suffer for it.

I came back to my messy house, which was growing more possessions I didn't need as my income increased. I had all I had ever needed in my car. I was sick and lonely, but somehow free and happy there. I could go anywhere I wanted. I could do anything I wanted. Now I was a productive member of my community and I

hated my job, just like so many others. My definition of success was way different.

It was normal for me to have nightmares. About mice, and rats, and other rodents they used. I heard their screams in my sleep. Yes, they do scream. They feel pain, they know terror. I would never again think of another living being as just an animal. My conscience had at me once my guard was down. I slept poorly almost every night.

But that night, I went to bed exhausted, skipped dinner, and didn't watch any TV. I didn't even read. I was out in seconds. And I had the weirdest dream I'd ever had in my life.

I was floating in space. It wasn't normal space, either. It was surrounded by nebulas and huge star clusters. But these stars were every color in the rainbow. Some were orange and violet. Some had ringed halos and luminous, transparent spheres about them. Others shone like jewels so bright that the lines of their radiance went past my vision.

My vision was so sharp I could focus on others standing in space with me, though they were many miles away. I could read their facial expressions. I knew their thoughts. I felt their feelings. I don't know how. I just did.

We were dressed in flowing fabrics that looked Roman, or Greek. We had sandals, and sashes, and circlets about our heads. Our many colored heads. Not one of us looked the same. Everyone had different shades, hues, and values to their skin, hair, and eyes. The woman next to me, a perfect specimen of female anatomy, had dark-gold skin, silvery-bluish hair, and midnight-blue eyes set inside dark green orbs instead of white. She was only there for a moment, glancing at me, and then she was simply gone, and reappeared at a different place in the line of battle we were drawing. Every one of the sixty or seventy of us had a completely different, quite beautiful, color combination. And our eyes. Our eyes had light shining from them where humans had the black iris at the center. A line of bright-eyed, multi-colored gods, floating in space.

Floating there in space without suits, without air.

And somehow this didn't bother me. It was normal.

There was tension. I could feel everyone was ready for a rough fight. There was no adrenaline, or panic as humans might have, but there was a sharp, focused preparedness. One all of us had trained a lifetime for.

The star in front of us, a massive red giant, had a dark shadow upon it. It was not a natural shadow. It was a blocky, misshapen thing, reflecting not one lumen of light back at us. And yet, even so, our eyes could make out the details of its demonic build. It was shifting and growing in clunky starts and spurts, and new blood red lights appeared in its exposed innards which I knew were eyes. It had thousands of beady, blinding eyes.

It was perhaps a thousand miles across, but just a tiny flea on the surface of the star it was killing. Floating in the sun's upper ionosphere, the machine had sunk its tentacles down into the flames, into the life of the burning giant, and was draining it of all its essence — using it to feed itself and grow. The sun was rapidly dying. And it was calling to us for help. I could feel it. Calling for help against the black monster.

So we had come to do battle against the shadow.

But it had help.

Six giant, spiky egg-shaped orbs hovered around the sun also. Each one four times as big as the machine. I could hear them (yes, even in a vacuum) spinning, creating low, sickening vibrations and building up energy. We had gotten here just in time.

Suddenly many were wearing armors. Out of nowhere. Plate mail, with a velvety-fine skin-tight coat of mail underneath, with helms, gauntlets, and metal boots perfectly designed to fit us. Slowly turning circles of light rose around our heads with ancient writing, which announced our blazing souls to whomever could read them. Some had metallic kite shields. Two of us up front, dressed in red, even had flaming swords, blazing away without oxygen. Not one of us looked a day over 20, but somehow I knew those two in front were well into their billions.

Myself and my line of fighters had only the chain mail. No plate, no shields. Our halos of light had two distinct rings. The commanders up front had five.

The fight started by all of us lining up our hands in unison, like a militant line of chorus dancers, and releasing fusion that arced across space and struck the machine.

It reacted by screaming. It wasn't a scream of pain, but of rage. And it was deafening to our ears, capable of hearing things that most beings can only see, smell, or guess at.

The advanced ranks of our numbers put up shields, and plowed into the thing with other energies. Light beams, arcing massive lightning bolts. Sparkling whips of shattering power. Those of us who were startled by the noise and thrown off balance remained incapacitated until one of the warlords (the guys in red) raised his hand and thought the noise away. My senses were still reeling. I couldn't think properly, and I knew that whatever we were, thinking with absolute, practiced clarity was essential to our arsenal.

The machine erupted with energies of its own, hurling them at us with deadly accuracy, while our ranks parried and countered them.

My thoughts, even shocked as they were, were racing. I was managing distances, time, space, sub-atomic particles, and energy all at trillions of calculations per second. I knew that time was not the same for us as it was for the rest of existence. And this evil black thing was matching our speed. I don't think me or the two on either side of me were very experienced. The sound had stunned us into almost uselessness. On my left, a girl who looked maybe eighteen squinted her eyes in sheer concentration and her halo glowed brightly enough to throw off dark energy coming at us. On my right a stunning woman with a muscular build threw her tan sienna hands forward in a crossed pattern and saved me from being impaled by a lance of pulsing purple shadow.

She turned toward me.

"Jandren! Have you gone stupid?" Her thoughts came into my head, in perfect English. Her eyes widened upon seeing mine.

The other girl turned toward me as well, sensing her friends alarm.

I was looking back and forth between them with bewilderment. *"What?"* I thought.

"Soul Juxtaposition!" the eighteen year old said, who I knew was named Kylla Keo. Her skin was a beautiful shade of gold. She was 195 million years old. A baby. And we had been friends all our lives. And somehow, I knew a Soul Juxtaposition was an incredibly rare — almost impossible — event. The last thing any of this race ever expected to see. Apparently bad timing, too.

The other turned her burning amber eyes on me. Wow. Intimidating!

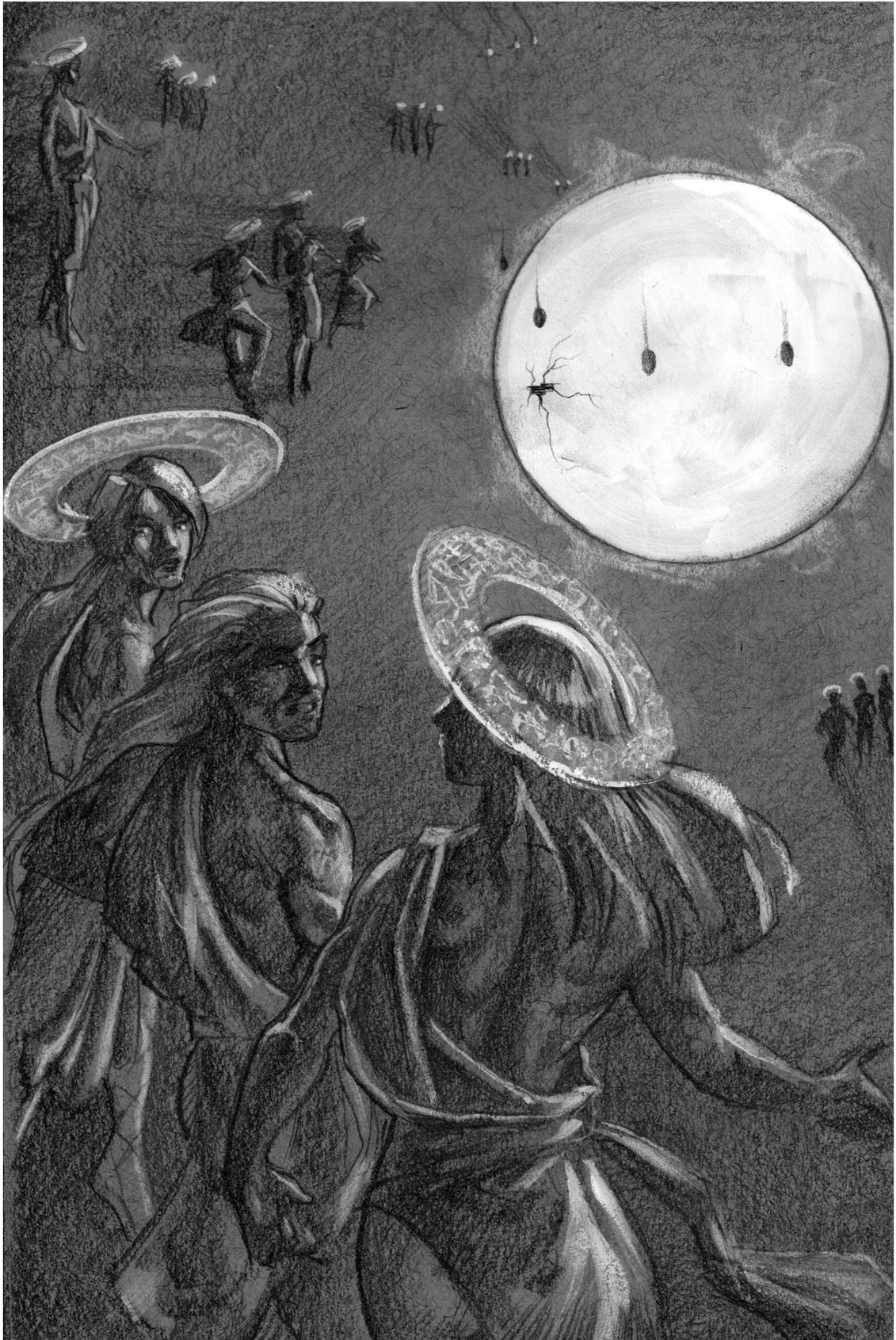
"Whoever you are, begone! We need his true soul here now! This is a trap!" Her name was Aquilarr Astraness. She watched the body I was in being born before time began.

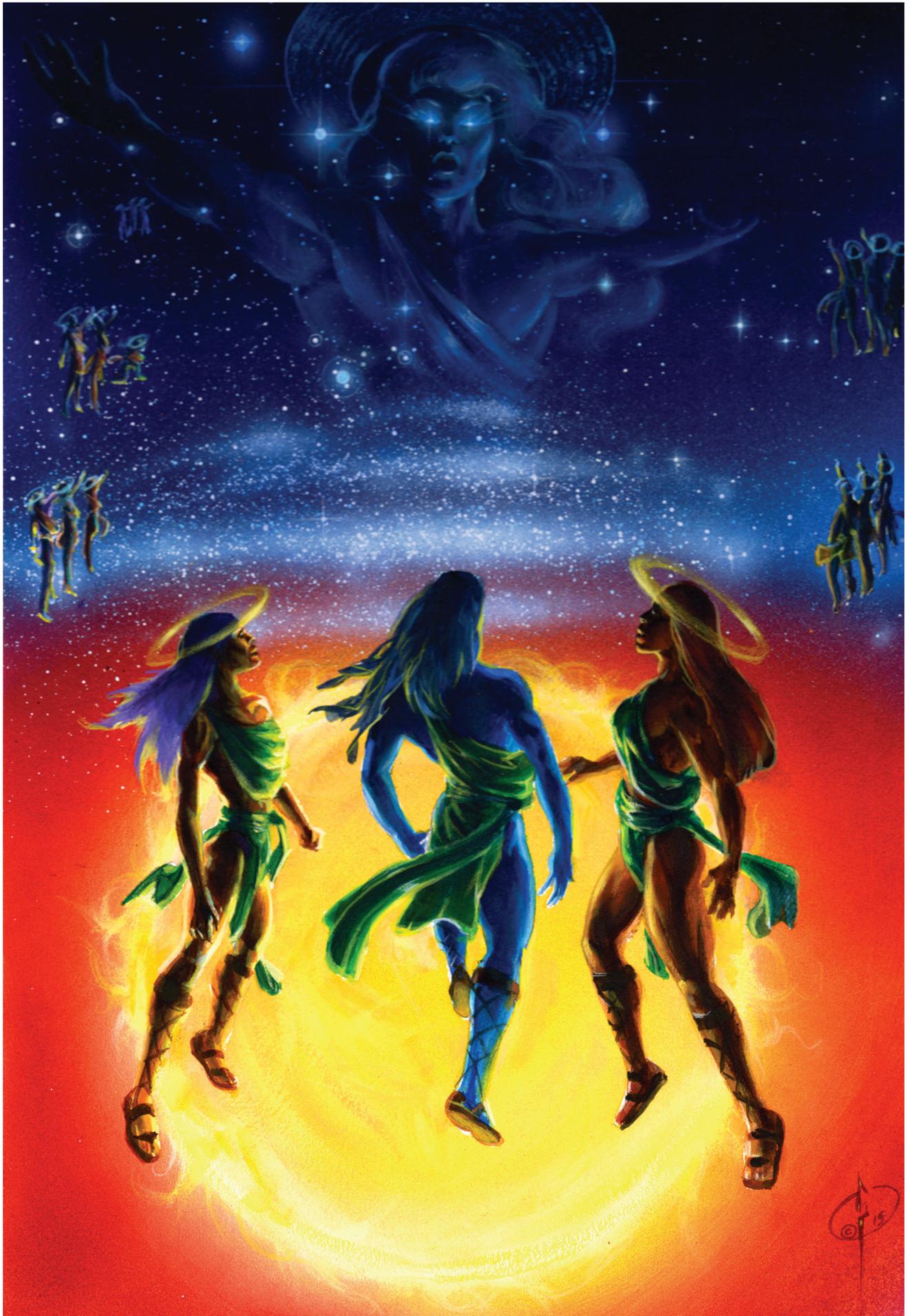
"I... I don't know how I got here! I'm... dreaming, aren't I?" I thought to them.

They were concentrating on defending us in the fight, and thinking to me, and they were about to say something harsh — I could feel it — and then something happened. There was a sickening pulse from the eggs. They had built up enough dark energy, and they flashed an attack outward at six of our numbers. The two commanders deflected it, but four others could not. They were hit, and arched back in agony as black spikes grew out of their bodies, even through their skulls. They flailed in desperation, but the spikes twisted, turned, and impaled them again and again, each one growing more spikes. By the time half a second was up, they had become gross, distended corpses, throwing more black flashes out at their allies who were unprepared for an attack from their lost friends.

I felt them die.

Quickly the tide of battle turned on us. We were being wiped out by a horrible, nightmarish weapon. I felt the agony of the dying through some connection I could not shut off. That half second to them was like a century of suffering, and it was a wretched, nerve-wrenching death. I also knew that the black light was crushing





I woke screaming, covered in cold sweat.

I could still see those blazing blue eyes.

It was the most real dream I had ever experienced. The colors, the sounds, smells... the feelings... had been so sharp, so detailed. It was like reality in 4K when one was used to a TV made in the 50s. In fact, upon waking, my first thought was: *Oh, my God. That was reality. This is the dream.*

I could remember every detail.

There was no going back to sleep after that.

