

CHAPTER 22

The True Enemy at Last

99.99%.

That was how close we got. Less than one percent of one percent of every living thing on the planet was *not* in trance. And that number was largely right in the camp. Hali. His high guard. Cowboy. Us. The Atraxian commander and his surrounding elite troops. Had we all laid down and gone under, it might have ended well.

But with a Zorian facing us, we just didn't have the guts.

The Zorian ship, waiting all those millennia, wasn't trying to make another ship. It was waiting until it had absorbed enough spirits and eaten enough souls to make a *Zorian itself*. And although it may have had to jump the gun a bit, it had succeeded. What stood before us now was no longer an Atraxian. It may have been once, and The King Admiral had clearly been willing to give itself completely over to the crystal, but now it had evolved into the true enemy of all existence. The shape, size, and appearance never mattered. A Zorian was anything that had been utterly consumed by evil. And now, far too late, we understood.

Our eyes bled looking at it.

In the moment our power was concentrated upon countering the quantum blast, it struck — and struck mortally.

A black beam seared out from its forehead — its black third eye — and struck Karen square in the back. It came out her front along with ribs and shards of spine. Cowboy dodged to the side so fast it seemed as if he had tessered himself.

The beam swept to the side and cut down Hali's entire high guard — all hundred of them in one swing. They were cut in half along with the hill behind them. The beam swept toward Avaril, who tessered out, and then banked sharply toward Quilah. I stepped in the way, drained of all my focus from countering such hideous force in the quantum blast, I stepped anyway. I held up my arms in a cross pattern and prayed my life would stop the beam from reaching Quilah.

Then a meteor fell from the heavens at near the speed of light, and plowed the Zorian Atraxian into the earth with an earth-shattering boom. Pieces from the battleship *Bright* and the *Dark Star* were raining down fiery death upon us, and the maelstrom had just begun. Funny that the very first chunk had hit the Zorian square on, but that hadn't been chance. It had been thrown.

The black beam still fired, even from fifty feet underground, and it was still on target.

And Khelben, armor torn asunder, psycho prism blazing like a thousand suns, eyes on scarlet fire, slammed down in front of me with a stance that rocked the ground, blocking the beam with his orange crystal arm. He angled it right back where it came from.

How he had survived the quantum detonation I will never know. But what a sight to see. He looked like righteous hell, and boy was he pissed.

"It's coming back up!" he said.

Avaril, I, Khelben, and even Karen from the ground, let the horror have it with everything we had. Fire, TK,



lightning, lasers, split atoms, quantum light, and every other energy we could manipulate into existence. We hit it so hard we had to shield the rest of camp from the blast. Nothing could have survived that. But it did. It came out of the smoking crater laughing like the grinding gears of some huge, fractured machine struggling to make itself go.

And it sent everything back at us.

We were in bad shape to begin with. Even with the Vasserian crystal ship powering us, we barely survived that attack. We dodged, absorbed, deflected, tessered, and redirected the assault, aiming at falling masses of starship coming down on our city. And while we were doing that, the Zorian attacked us personally.

It came for Avaril with six arms spinning randomly like offset blender blades. She pulled her saber, cut one piece off, and then had to defend herself with all she had. But the thing was more skilled than her by far, and quickly she was bleeding from a dozen deep wounds. Her iridescent blood splattered all over us as if it had hit a fan.

Khelben downloaded Vasserian sword skill to her in a millionth of a second, and she avoided the death stroke, but she was in full retreat, backing up as we closed in.

I struck it in the head, aiming for the crystals, only to have its head spin completely around on me, stare me in the face, and hit me point blank with the black beam. It punched through my guts and out my lower back. More than the physical pain, it hurt my soul. I felt as though I had just seen my entire family die in the gas chamber. As if I had just lost my wife to a fall that I could have stopped if I had just held on one second more. As if my children had been playing in the street when I hit them with my car because I was drunk. It went on and on. My mind buckled. I fell.

Khelben used the moment to grab the thing and tried to tesser it into the sun. It countered the tesseract, just like in my first dream. There was no escape. No easy winning move. It turned four of its arms on Khelben and began ripping him apart, literally. He hammered it with the orange arm, and pieces of it flew. He blasted it with light from his crystal eye — and punched holes through it. But it wasn't enough. It was like a berserk grizzly bear tearing into a child. Khelben was losing body parts again. His crystal arm was up protecting his head and neck while his dense, TK-shielded body was being broken and shredded over and over.

Karen was dying, but Vasserians die hard.

“Get it to the crystal!” she said. “Our crystal will end it!”

I tried holding the Zorian in place with over a million tons of TK. The ground around us warped and crushed in on our battleground, but the Zorian resisted me. Easily. Then it showed me what TK was. It created a singularity directly over my head. It was all I could do to protect Quilah and myself from being crushed into the size of a single molecule instantly by redirecting all my power against the terrifying gravity. Again, it had completely controlled my own powers with sheer tactics. I was hamstrung, and as it happened, the thing matter-manipulated a thousand white hot knives and sent them hurling down the gravity well toward me and Quilah. I had no time or power, so I had to block every one of them with my hands. I missed a dozen, and they burned through me — but as they did, I twisted sideways so they would be set off course and not hit Quilah.

All around us, the chanting of the entire world was deafening. Echoing. Waiting for us to join so it could finish all this.

Quilah finally came awake. His eyes snapped open and he saw everything happening all around him. The steady hail of massive fire-wreathed debris, the slaughter of his people as the Atraxian elite guard closed the noose around us, the dire last stand of his Beholden as we were being annihilated.

Khelben was being killed. He was almost certainly dead already, and he knew it. His flesh was stripped away, his muscles in tatters. His bones, every one, were ruptured. He was holding himself together with TK now. And yet he grappled with the Zorian to the last, refusing to give up. Pieces of both of them continued to fly off into the distance. Khelben's crystal eye of wrath kept punching holes in the Zorian until it plucked the thing from his

skull. Khelben's reaction was to spit gold fire into the dark thing's face.

Avaril tessered back in, with a piece of the Vasserian ship in her hands shaped perfectly like a sword. Genius.

She let the Zorian have it. It was a good hit. Straight to the head. She cut the head in half as the black crystals parted to dodge the orange crystal blade. It took the hit, and returned it with ten times the speed. Before Avaril could tesser out, she was cut to the bone a dozen times and her own sword was sticking out of her chest. She fell back, an expression of shocked aggravation on her face.

"Goddammit," she said.

Hali picked up the Hammer of Genocide.

"NO!" Quilah shouted.

The black beam cut Hali in two. He died almost instantly. Almost.

He tossed the hammer to Cowboy.

99.99%. That's how close we got.

Those black crystals, even at one percent of one percent of their power, were decimating us without effort.

"LET... GO!!!" Quilah yelled. "PLEASE! EVERYONE! JUST LET GO! GIVE UP!"

Cowboy paused, something that wasn't in his nature. He was actually considering it. In the one second of advantage he had been given, his mind teetered on the razor's edge of indecision.

And in that moment, the black beam came for him.

Seeing it, Khelben left his head open, pulled his own crystal arm off his body, and hurled it into the path of the beam, giving Cowboy the one moment he needed. Khelben took a direct blow to the skull.

"DONT!" Quilah screamed. "Cowboy, PLEASE!"

Cowboy hurled the hammer with all his might. He was cut down a fraction of a second later by Atraxian gunfire, and fell over Karen, trying with his last act to protect her.

Before the Zorian could take action, Avaril, and Khelben physically threw themselves onto it, and wrestled it to the ground. It tore into them like a rabid wolverine, and all they felt was searing pain. They put all they had into that attack. It wasn't enough, but its beam missed the hammer by a millimeter, and the hammer headed home toward the *Tooth of Earth*.

Cowboy lived long enough to see it was on target, then breathed his last breath.

Quilah jumped into the path of the hammer with all the speed of a lightning quick mouse.

And the only one close enough, or fast enough, to stop him was me.

It was a fraction of a second that lasted a thousand years in my sped-up Alpha-Knight brain. In Alpha time, that hammer was crawling across the air like cold molasses inching its way through gelatin. In real time, it was moving too fast to stop with sheer force. I was spent. No TK left. Nothing left but my body, which was limited to the physical world. Much slower than my mind.

But faster by one moment than Quilah.

The thought later occurred to me — Quilah would not have wanted me to intervene. Maybe I should not have done what I did. It was a knee-jerk reaction. Save my boy. In my defense, it was all I could have done. In the moment of truth, there was no decision at all. I tackled Quilah aside, even as he screamed in protest.

The hammer hit our ship.

There was a profound, deafening gong in a very sharp, specific tone. We felt it pass through our bodies. And then a blinding explosion in every color the Vasserian eye could behold as the ship burst into millions of shards, scattering across the landscape.

And then nothing.

