

CHAPTER 4

A Discussion of Power

It turned out there was a forest on this energy rock. Probably thousands of them, but the one we saw was down in a deep valley, in a huge cenote (a great big circular hole in the ground) fifty miles wide. It went down three miles into the slate rock that the planet was made of. We hadn't seen it from the tower, nor from the air before. It was well hidden and even better protected, with crystal towers surrounding it that rose miles into the stratosphere. It made me wonder what other surprises this place had in store. After all, Alpha Knights had been working on this place for millions of years. They had certainly come up with some cool stuff in that time, and the Forest of Lords was one of them. There wasn't a single species of tree I recognized. They ran the gamut from one foot tall to over ten-thousand feet. There were vines growing between them so large one could build a city block on them. There were tens of thousands of life forms I could register with my enhanced senses right off the bat. The smell of it was the most pungent, exotic aroma I'd known, and yet I hadn't smelled it just a few hundred miles away — it had taken us less than a minute to fly here.

There was a giant mountain dome in the center of it. It had symbols and glyphs all over it, geometric shapes, lines, and runes from simple to so complex that they covered many hundreds of square feet one at a time. We landed on the center circle of that rock. Energy instantly flooded into us, like drinking ten espressos at once.

The three of us gasped. Actura and Khelben chuckled.

"It's one of many power spots on the Planet of Discipline," Khelben said.

"We come here to recharge after missions, before the next," Actura said.

"It feels so natural," Kylla finally spoke. I mean Karen. Her real name was Karen. "Everything here is in perfect balance. Everything feels safe."

"Despite the fact that the grounds have been destroyed in battles several times over the last several hundred million years," Khelben said. "Things grow back. Life prevails. The energy stays here."

"Life after death?" Karen said. "Reincarnation? Past lives, multiple lives? Spirit?"

"All of it true, every bit of it, and more," said Actura. "Much more than you could ever imagine. The thoughts of every living being, in every dimension, through all of time. Somewhere, it all exists."

I tried to wrap my human mind around it. It was, to me, the meaning of infinity. Somewhere, at some point, *everything* exists.

"Evolution also?" I said.

"Yes, that also," he said, his eyes finally going from night to dawn again. "Everything evolves, changes, expands. Everything shifts. Nothing stays the same, and therefore nothing is considered real. All of this is the product of our imaginations. Which is where our power really comes from."

"Nothing is real?" Avaril asked. "Nothing?"

"That is real which does not change," Actura said. "And, at the same time, everything is real, as long as you are willing to let your definition of real change as well. Every last thing. All of creation, down to every particle and feeling, is real. And all of it evolves."

I squinted and followed every train of thought as they rushed off in separate directions.

“So we need to go save this alien race, so they can evolve,” I said.

“Just so,” Actura said. “And you get to define ‘save.’”

Khelben, who was standing there like a piece of the stone itself, turned his head (startling me, since I forgot he was there) and said, “He gets like that sometimes.”

“Mysterious?” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“But you understand him,” I said.

“It’s taken me half a billion years of practice,” he said.

Actura waited while we talked about him in the third person.

“Why are you — and Vashtarr — so cool, and everyone else seems to have some level of freakish about them?” I asked Actura.

“Our spirits understand yours,” he said. “We relate better to humanity. These people, our race, have been at war now over a trillion years. Millions of lifetimes of stars. Most of us don’t last that long, but those who get near it let go of their stories, and realize that all life, no matter how different, is sacred. And passing.”

“How old are you?” I asked.

“I am twenty-one trillion years old, by the rotation of your planet,” he said. “I have seen 2,100 generations of stars.”

That was an example of how older Vasserians measured time. Star lifetimes. I knew this body I was in had not even experienced one yet.

“But you said there is life after death?” I said. “And the stuff you’re saying, I’ve heard it on Earth. All of it. What happens after death to Vasserians?”

“We don’t know,” he said.

That silenced all three of us pretty well. Twenty-one trillion years and the guy didn’t know? A long pause followed. I was, of course, the first to open his big mouth.

“You... You live longer than stars, fight horrible demons, and... And I’ve seen your kind die, sort of. I mean, if Vashtarr hadn’t been there, knights would have perished fighting that box and its six eggs, right?”

His memory took no time at all to go back millions of years. It was only a moment ago for him. And he knew exactly which battle I meant.

“Correct. If someone of enough power hadn’t come along, those Knights would have been on their journey.”

“And no one knows what happens then?” I said. “They never come back?”

“Sometimes they are met again, in different times, in different places, far from home. Most times, they are not. I have met some who have died. Most I have seen pass on, I have not met again.”

“There’s no easy formula to this,” Avaril said to me. “Let it be. We don’t need all the answers.”

“Yeah, I kinda do,” I said.

She smiled and put a friendly hand on mine. It was warm in the cool air of the jungle. The sun was going down over the rim of the cenote. “One day we can come back and spend a few thousand years learning all kinds of things...” She paused. “Jared.” She smiled at me. My heart fluttered. Or maybe that was habit, too. “Until then, let’s get the mission done.”

She made all kinds of sense. “Okay,” was all I could say looking into her eyes. They looked like a perfect cut of amber with the sun behind them. Her face was beautiful. I couldn’t place her heritage... Oh yeah. Vasserian.

“Why are the mission parameters vague?” Karen asked Khelben.

“When the High Council sends any of us on mission,” he said, “Usually they fill in every detail. But the high lords, Actura and the kings, like The Vashtarr, are more often less controlling and much more creative. I think The Vashtarr knows you have what it takes, and knew that when he invited you.”

“You will do the right thing,” Actura said. “In a society that controls reality down to the smallest particles of existence, *faith* is not a word in our vocabulary. But that is what I would offer you.”

“Have faith?” I said, somewhat flabbergasted.

He nodded.

“We don’t even know how to use our powers,” I said. “I’m not sure I can telekinesis a medium sized pebble, much less an asteroid field. We’re supposed to go in blind to save an entire race, knowing nothing, being able to do nothing?” I shrugged at my two companions. “What the hell?”

“There are other kinds of power than blasting things and teleporting,” Avaril said.

Actura smiled and nodded. “Well said.”

“I think we will do okay,” Karen said. “It will be a fantastic adventure.”

I looked at Khelben. “Where we can die if we screw up. An entire race can die.”

He looked back at me. “Yes.”

“And if we die, we never wake up?” I said.

“Most likely,” Actura said. “From the previous experiences with the Chronos Reactor, yes.”

“Pointless to ask where our souls go then. You don’t know, right?” I said.

“We can see souls when we are attuned enough, or experienced enough,” Actura said. “Some of us can even give them energy, or change them like we change any matter. If we can see down far enough into the building blocks of reality, we can manipulate it. We know souls exist, we interact with them, like now, here, wearing these suits of matter. But where they go after death, we have never had time or endurance to follow. I personally think they try to go home, wherever that was. But I cannot know for sure. It is possible the Kings know.”

“Manipulate souls!” I said. “That’s...um...evil, isn’t it? Kinda dark side?”

“We don’t see anything as evil or good,” Actura said. “Except Zorians. The black robot things you saw before. They are truly evil. Seeking utter non-existence of all matter for the sole sake of its destruction, and no other. Deliberate, unrepentant destruction, by our definition, is evil.”

“Then what is good?” Karen asked.

“Creation,” Actura answered. “Pure creation, from nothing, which none of us can do. We make things from other things, changing the appearance of matter, but truly creating new matter from spirit is no longer within our power.” He looked down, almost it seemed, in shame. “Therefore, the next best thing, is to defend creation.”

Khelben turned toward us, (startling me again), and said, “You are wearing the bodies of Alpha Knights. So must you behave accordingly. You need to know our few laws.”

“I’m probably gonna break ‘em,” I said. Karen looked at me. Avaril let out a sigh. I shrugged. “I know myself! I’m just sayin’. Don’t count on me to be all in with the rules. My hero in life never obeyed the rules, and he always won.”

Khelben faced us with no expression on his metallic brown face. His eyes looked so deep blue it hurt.

“We are defenders above all,” he began. “Do not override another being’s free will. Justice and Truth must prevail. Preside over all beings honorably. Never raise your intention against another Vasserian. When wielding power of any sort, always use only the least amount necessary to accomplish the task at hand. And lastly,” he paused, looking at Actura. “The Ancients must be obeyed.”

I stared. I began to open my mouth, but Avaril poked me with her hard Vasserian finger of steel. Karen had me covered.

“Truth and Justice,” Karen said. “Whose truth and justice would that be, exactly?”

“Yours, in this case,” Actura said. Whoa. Those aliens were in for it now. Don’t hire humans to do an angel’s job.

“Preside over all beings honorably,” Avaril said. “We preside over... all beings?”

Actura handed that to Khelben with a very human gesture of “you take this one.”

“We do,” Khelben said matter of factly. “We are the most powerful beings in existence. It is our duty.” When he saw the lowly humans had problems with that, he added, almost sounding guilty, “If they are lucky. There aren’t enough of us to guard even a billionth of one percent of civilized reality as it is.”

I looked at Actura.

“True,” he said. “Our numbers are a tiny fraction of what they once were, before the beginning of creation.”

Avaril let out a breath. “All *kinds* of grey area there, man.”

Actura was linked in like I was, like we all were, so he understood her instantly.

“I understand,” he said. “But there was no one there at the beginning telling us what to do and not to do. We came up with what worked for everyone the best. It is not perfect.”

“Oh, Holy Shit!” I exclaimed. “The *gods* are faking it until they make it! We’re sooo...” Avaril poked me harder. I think on Earth she had been dangerous. Maybe it was best I hadn’t followed her onto the bus. Thinking of it that way, it did sound kinda creepy. She eyeballed me with a playful smirk. She heard me. Dammit.

“Who decides what the least amount of power to use is?” Karen asked.

“You do,” Actura said. “We don’t much micromanage our Knights. We trust your creativity and intellect. Each mission holds thousands or millions of judgement calls. They are yours to make.”

“No plan survives first contact,” Khelben said. I’d heard that before from my Marine friend. He’d said it just the same exact way, too. “We improvise, adapt...”

“And overcome,” I finished. Without telepathy.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Do you Vasserians have many incarnations floating around?” I said.

“Some of us a few, some millions, some none,” Actura said. “Every situation and being is different.”

“How about this guy?” I thumbed at Khelben. “I know a guy just like him back home. Even looks like him. Why didn’t you bring him along?”

“An incarnation must be perfect in order for the Chronos Reactor to carry their soul so far,” he said. “And that soul must be ready to go. We won’t violate their free will if they are still attached to their lives. They must have a good reason to be willing to change everything, or already in a state of flux so strong that it doesn’t matter.”

Ah HA! So I wasn’t the only one with a few secrets, it seemed. They both looked at me. Dammit, that was getting old. Mute button!

“Every living being out there is *some* form of an incarnation,” Khelben said. “Of a Vasserian, or a native Vasserian life form, from the beginning of time. All of them. All of it, period. Many vary from the original in every conceivable way. Only a slight few, out of trillions and trillions, are perfect.”

“You three are very special,” Actura said. “It was not a thing we chose to do lightly. You cannot be replaced, either.”

I coughed and backed off. My low self-esteem didn’t like that. Karen felt like she knew that about herself already. Avaril felt like she wanted to believe it. She did, on the surface. But backing off made my mouth fire off both barrels. I just can’t seem to ever back off enough. Believe me, it’s cost me dearly (and yet would).

“Who are the Ancients?” I said.

Actura actually stopped to think. That amazed me. In the second he paused, his Vasserian mind must have had over a hundred trillion thoughts. Over one question? At last, he looked at me and his hands came up to make gestures, to aid his communication in speaking to a human.

“To simplify things greatly, and edit for time,” he said, “They are our gods.”

My face was blank. Avaril was quicker.

“How many are there? Have you met them? Is Vashtarr one of them?” she fired off.

“There were twelve,” he answered. “No, I have not, luckily. No, The Vashtarr is not one of them, but he is the

only known son of the One Highest... God. Vassaire was the one who created the Ancients to help him create Vasseria before the dawn of the time matrix.”

“I know you’re condensing a trillion years of history, and religion it sounds like,” Karen said, “But it feels like you’re holding something back.”

Actura gave her a deep glance. “Your empathy is already adapting to your new mind,” he said. “Yes, there is much I must leave out. It doesn’t matter much anyway in your circumstance.”

“It might,” Khelben said. Actura frowned.

“Then tell them as much as you wish,” Actura said to the younger Knight.

Khelben gestured with his hands as well, holding one open before him as if offering an apple or something. He paused as well! For nearly... *two* seconds.

“The Lord of Power, who shall not be named, was the mightiest of the Ancients. He killed the other eleven, and drank their Energy. For this, he was cast out of Vasseria. In the dark beyond, in the non-existence, he grew and brooded, and created what your language would call *technology*. He evolved it, and built it upon his planet... his ship... and came back to Vasseria much later, to take vengeance and begin the Trillion Year War. To destroy Vassaire’s creation.”

“Trillion Year War. Before time.” I said, and dodged Avaril’s finger.

“Much of this is now mythology,” Actura said. “We now give names and definitions to things that, back then, had none. Needed none.”

The girls were riveted to the spot, listening to Khelben.

“As Zoria, his ghostship planet, grew near, radiation and attacks began to erode life on the Planet of All Living Things. Over the many millennia, Vasserians took to the safety of the crystal cities, as their planet slowly began to die.

“It was in this time that the High Council back then summoned their high god, Vassaire. They summoned him to return from Alpha Prime — the dimension of infinity, of all pure creation and creativity. And he came. Bearing weapons, and armor, and the means to create the first of the Alpha Knights.

“Back then the Knights could do anything they could imagine, with no limitations. But there were few. A Vasserian had to sacrifice his entire life, his soul, to become one of the guardian angels of the true home. Many knew fear for the first time in their immortal lives. Only a few stepped forward, and those rose up into the heavens to do battle with whatever the Zoriath threw at them. But it was not enough.

“As the dread ghostship of the Lord of Power grew nearer over the ages, Zorians evolved, growing more powerful and more dangerous. Faster, more efficient, better at destroying. Slowly, as Vasserians began to die, more joined the ranks of the Knights and learned the arts of creative war — also becoming faster and more skilled — more creative — at their abilities. Zoria sent ships of its own, some as large as suns, to hover in our orbit and bombard us with missiles, radiation, and beams of wrath. The Knights knocked them down, and tried to prevent them from doing even more damage on contact with the planet. Often in vain.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Ships as big as suns? How big was this planet?”

“Immeasurable by today,” Actura said. “Ever growing, until the end days, when it was being destroyed faster than it could grow. But at its height, perhaps the size of your home galaxy.”

“My God, the gravity!” I said.

“There was no law then called gravity,” Khelben said. “Unless some Knight needed it as a weapon, or a defense.”

“But... The ships fell down...”

“They *went* down,” Khelben said.

“Gahhhh...” I hissed.

“You are listening to mythology,” Actura said. “It won’t make sense. It won’t hold up to your view of reality.

But it did happen.”

“How do you know?” Karen said.

“I was there,” he said.

Long pause. Long. Several seconds.

“Before time,” I said.

“Actura is the son of The Vashtarr, first of the Alpha Knights. He is what’s called a First One. Born before the Big Bang. Not after,” said Khelben, deep homage in his voice. Almost awe.

“Bu... But... Scientists say the Big Bang was only thirteen billion years ago...” I muttered.

Actura grinned. Khelben scoffed. Karen laughed out loud.

I looked at Avaril for support. She shrugged. Clearly she felt some of what I did. “What do humans know?” she said. “Obviously Einstein’s speed of light constant... isn’t.”

Khelben nodded. “Just so. Laws change the farther one gets from the center of all things. From Alpha Prime. Laws are never the same on any two places, no matter how minuscule or immeasurable the difference. Even from me to you there are differences. A good enough Knight will see them. Use them in battle.”

I didn’t need to pause. My brain was carrying my thoughts along faster than light.

“Knights could do anything,” I said. “Anything they could imagine. If they can do that, why haven’t you won?”

“Actually, we technically lost the Trillion Year War,” Actura said.

My eyes bugged. “...HOW?!”

Our God, Vassaire, rose on the last day to confront The Dark One, and gave his enemy a clear opening. The Lord of Power struck him down, and the Energy that came forth from Vassaire’s broken heart created all of existence.”

“The... Big Bang...” I said. Khelben nodded.

“We call it the expansion of the Time Matrix.”

“It is expanding still,” Actura said.

“How did you survive?” I asked Actura.

“All who still lived in those final moments, less than a thousandth of one percent of us who had once lived, were caught up in the expanding wave. Caught up and hurled forward in time to a random point and a random place. Some came out early on, as I did, into a universe of laws and rules. Built of *things* instead of ideas, with solid matter to rely on. Others came out later, and still others have yet to emerge. The waves continue, very much like on your planet. From the center of all things, the core of Alpha Prime, now closed to us all. No one can any longer simply wish for a thing and have it be. Now we must know how to create it using the laws given to us to govern and defend.”

“But because Alpha Prime is closed,” Khelben said, “The Lord of Power is no longer omnipotent. His power, for the first time, is limited. Even if it *is* immeasurable — even to Alpha Knights — it *is* technically limited. It has an end to it, somewhere. And he knows it.”

“Whoa. The bad guy lived?” I said.

“Yes,” they both said at once.

I put it together. “The Ancients must be obeyed.”

They nodded.

“And the only Ancient left is the Lord of Power. The Devil, basically.”

Actura slowly nodded.

“Why hasn’t he ordered all of you to surrender?” I asked.

Another second of pause.

“No one knows,” Khelben said.

“There is much still that no one, not even you, know,” Avaril said.

Actura nodded. “Yes, that is so.”

Avaril seemed pleased. “Good.”

“Yeah, so not boring,” Karen said. “I like it.”

It gave me a thrill. Like the last moments on an upward-headed roller coaster, knowing the big drop off was just over the rise. The gods of the gods didn’t know what was up.

The light in Actura’s eyes was at about five p.m.

“We could discuss it for decades,” Actura said.

“Some of us do, on sentinel duty, or other long tasks,” Khelben said. “But we have been given an important mission.”

“With an M in the title,” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“Save an entire species from extinction in a war,” I said.

“Yes,” Actura said.

“Us four, with only his powers,” I gestured at Khelben. I meant no offense. He knew it and was not upset.

“It should be easy,” Karen said. “With what we know, what we can show them. We just show up and say, ‘Hey, you need to lay off this war. We can help you live really well. Everyone can be happy.’”

Avaril squinted her eyes. She was thinking like me. It wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Save them,” I said.

“Whatever that means to you,” Actura said.

“Our judgement, our mission, our call,” I said.

“Yes,” he smiled.

“Does King Vashtarr know how far he just stepped into the shit?” I said.

“Jared!” Avaril tried not to laugh. “A better attitude, man!”

“Yeah,” Karen said. “We can do this.”

I sighed. “Okay, we can do it. But I know what would happen if we tried this one on Earth.”

Their minds said, *What?* Even though they still had that nasty human habit of not speaking freely.

“They’d crucify us,” I said.



