

CHAPTER 5

A Long Journey in a Short Time

We flew across half the planet toward only Actura knew where. There were oceans, beaches, other forests, deserts, giant open slabs of rock, perfectly flat and smooth, thousands of miles across. All the life on the planet was contained in areas surrounded by crystal towers. And Khelben told me it was all, every last molecule, designed to be tesser away in an instant should the planet be attacked by Zorians.

“You can tesser entire chunks of planet?!” I asked. But I knew the answer in his mind already. Actura alone could tesser entire solar systems. Across universes. The scope of their power did not cease to put me in awe. And I knew we were barely scraping the surface.

Several minutes later, covering well over 100,000 miles, we came into view of the starport, where dozens of crystal ships of various sizes and configurations rested on power circles, halos up around their hulls, slowly rotating, like idling engines. Their light gave the entire countryside a beautiful golden orange tinge, like the last hours of day.

We landed at one of the control towers and the building beneath it. Our ship awaited beyond. It was a small vessel, perhaps one hundred feet in length. Its wings were folded back like a resting bird of prey. It shimmered with majesty and power, radiating light beams reaching from its hull into the sky. We could feel it had a full charge. On its side, in Vasserian, we read in English *Tooth of Earth*.

I looked at Actura.

“The Vashtarr built it for you, and named it, when last he was here,” he said.

“Millions of years ago,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Knowing we would... Never mind. Thanks. What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yep. Right. Okay.”

As we walked to the ship, Karen fell in alongside Actura and we heard them speaking.

“Do we eat?” Karen asked.

“Only when your bodies are injured or very depleted,” Actura said. “You will feel hungry, as you’re used to.”

“What do we eat?”

“Anything.”

“Anything...?”

Khelben reached out to the wall of stone the giant launching pad was built on and tore a chunk free. He began eating it like an apple.

“Whoa.” I said.

“Anything,” Karen said. “Okay.”

“Our bodies are energy based,” Actura said. “Your old ones were carbon based, and in a state of high evolution, designed to eat only specific things. Any matter at all can be translated into energy inside a Vasserian, provided you can get it inside you without harm.”

“Lava?” I asked. It was the gamer in me.

“In its cooler state,” Actura said.

“Are we allowed to make first contact with this race?” Avaril asked. “Have they met aliens before?”

“We as guardians strongly advise against it if it can be avoided,” Actura said. “It will change a species dramatically. It will radically alter their culture.”

“Usually not for the better,” Khelben said with his mouth full.

“They have met aliens before, technically,” Actura said. “Though the aliens are very similar to them, and in their past had similar origins.”

“How will we take any action without being able to reveal ourselves?” Avaril asked.

“I can shift us to be invisible, and intangible,” Khelben said. “It is part of my talent. My special gift. We will be ghosts. But our powers will still work in the world.”

“Neato,” Karen said. “Like real angels.”

The ship opened up to us. A ramp descended, mostly I think because we expected it to. Not because any Vasserian would need one. The ship began to ramp up its energy. It became brighter. The ground around it took on a vibration. A sound sang through the air like a chorus on a distant wind.

“How long will it take to get there?” I asked.

“The time and the distance are one,” Actura said. “I will be giving you as far a head start as I can. Once there, you are at the edge of my range. And beyond that, you will be outside the Hailnet of Vasserian communication.”

“Beyond help,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “It is possible that if you all combine power and send a message as far and as focused as you can, it might reach *some* Vasserian somewhere, but your aim would have to be flawless.”

When he said flawless, I knew he meant just that. Hit a star a billion light years away with a single laser beam of light. Hit a dime on a mountain with a bullet from 1000 miles away. That kind of flawless.

We boarded the ship. As we did, he stayed behind. I turned around, knowing I might never see him again.

“Actura,” I said. He perked up, listening. “Have Vasserians influenced Earth?”

“Only with the echoes of their incarnations,” Actura said. “Earth is too far away for us to easily reach in physical form. That’s why your souls alone had to make the journey. The ship I sent had not reached you before we needed you.”

My head might as well have had a huge exclamation point over it like a cartoon.

“What?” I said. “You sent a crystal ship?! To *Earth*!?”

“About 50,000 years ago,” he said.

I was speechless. A good trick for me.

He smiled that Mona Lisa knowing grin.

“It should be arriving any millennia now,” he said.

Which meant *any minute* to Vasserians.

“Earth is of vast quantum importance,” he said. “Someday, we will reach it. And someday, so will the Zorians.”

“You’d better hope we’re first,” Khelben said.

I stayed in the door as the ship floated off the ground by inches.

“What will we do? How will we ever make it?” I asked, genuinely concerned. “We have so much to deal with.”

“Every race is given the chance...” he said, looking off into space, completely at rest. But his voice changed slightly. Something that required Vasserian ears to hear the difference. “For their souls to awaken and become immortal. Their bodies might perish over and over, but the essence of who they are continues in new bodies. It is a critical turning point in spiritual evolution. Help comes almost always in the form of one brave soul, who takes the first step to enlightenment. Who rises above the others in thought and feelings. Their spirit will guide all the

others to the gates of immortality. After that, provided they are kept safe from Zorians, they have an eternity to become whatever they desire. Every race goes through this moment if they survive long enough.”

The ship was rising.

I didn't know what to say. I thought about all of Earth's messiahs, and how humans had reacted so far. Actura was looking up at me, that friendly smile on his gentle face.

“All it takes is one. The others will follow,” he said.

Then we were gone.

Once we had achieved a high orbit, looking down at the solar system and all its students, teachers, Knights, and gods, we hovered there for a brief moment. Then we felt Actura's mind stretch space all around us for one trillionth of a second, to snap us off into the distance. I felt that distance. It was beyond the limits of my imagination. But to give you an idea, if you were to cover your entire neighborhood — every house, wall, surface and object — with a number... The number one, followed by nothing but zeros in one-point type, that number would not begin to cover the light years we had just travelled in an infinitesimal, almost immeasurably small amount of time. Suddenly we were just there. Space around us looked different. Felt different. All the energy and vibrations of Terreine were long in the past — a forgotten dream. We were alone in deep space, surrounded by distant nebulas and different stars. I could see several galaxies, but we were between them, and no nearby suns lit our ship with their light. All around us was space, now, in my new vision, not so empty. I saw every cosmic ray, every wave of radiation, every signal on its way to or from someplace that sent it. I saw massive clouds of energy that had no form, striving for eons to become something else. I saw every particle of matter in the ether, seeking out other particles, as humans seek each other out to enter into relationships that they might not feel so alone.

But we were alone. And somehow it felt very natural. We were children of the stars now. Space was as much home to us as any planet we chose. It was peaceful.

Khelben showed us in a few minutes how to sit, in a yoga-like position on our knees and feet, and enter a trance that would generate a certain frequency from our brain, and power the ship. He said the ship was basically a giant reactor/amplifier, and that in itself, had no parts, circuits, weapons, defenses, or engines. It just did what we told it to. For its simplicity, it was very strong, hard to destroy, impervious to the stresses of gravity and heat, and would allow us to create anything we wanted within it. It could do anything we had the power (concentration) to allow, and it could achieve speeds that were well beyond lightspeed. In fact, to Vasserians, lightspeed was about where the tachometer began. Within a few minutes we were humming along at several thousand times the speed of light, and exponentially increasing. Khelben was piloting us, I assumed to avoid plowing through a star, but he said that wouldn't matter. It would only tickle the star, and give us some extra energy. Plowing through a solid mass, like a planet, on the other hand, might damage the planet and any life on it, which was unacceptable. Right. Damage. I think at the speeds we were traveling, and considering the invulnerability of the starship, hitting a planet like Earth might have vaporized it on the spot.

The journey took about a week. During that week we mostly stayed in a level 1 trance. Avaril got into it, and achieved level two, whereupon the ship lurched forward to another height of velocity. But that drained her mental batteries too quickly, so Khelben coaxed her out of it.

The trance was pleasing. It was like a perfect moment before drifting off into sleep. We could all feel the energy of our beings running through the ship, cycling and coming back to us a tiny bit stronger. After several hours, we had to pause to let the energy dissipate behind us in a long, spectral rainbow contrail that went for thousands of light years. I wonder what other alien races would make of that. If there were any nearby. Khelben said that life, in any form, was rare in most of existence. Perhaps one planet really had it for every hundred thousand that were working on it. In some places it was much more rare than that. There were “dark sectors” where suns had a hard time taking root and life was so rare that entire galaxies would just fizzle out. Black holes

would grow and consume what was left. We learned a great deal in those trances. More than would ever fit in our human brains back home.

We took shifts seeing if one of us could power the ship by itself, and learning to discover the powers we might be able to grasp in this ridiculously short fraction of an Alpha Knight's life. The selves that inhabited these bodies had a good deal of it down, but then, they'd been at it for millions of years. Khelben, a student himself but way ahead of the rest of us, tutored us in all this. His patience wasn't the greatest, but again I was reminded that he was a warrior in constant battle. He didn't have time for nice.

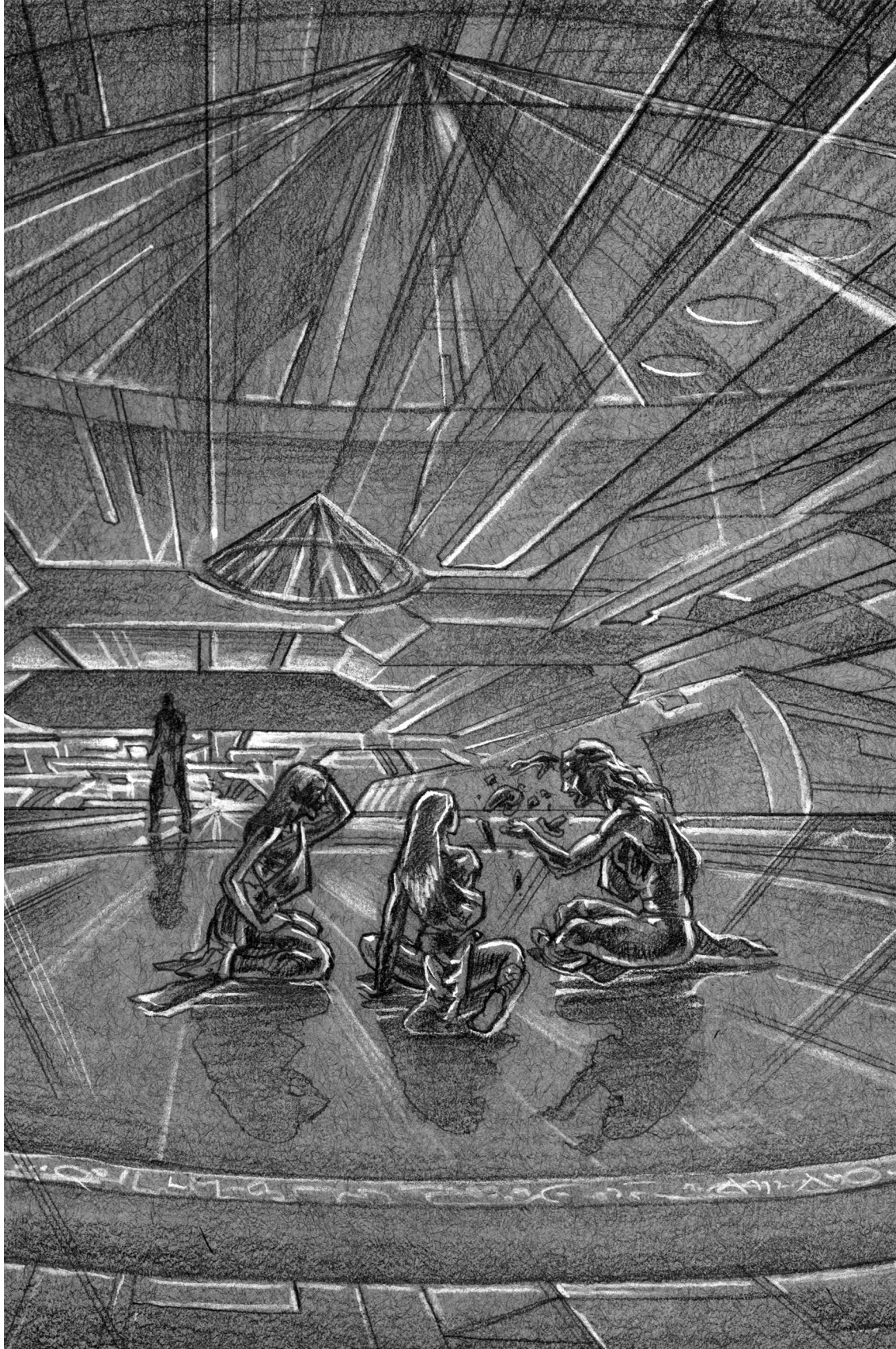
I got decent at telekinesis, and pyrokinesis. I could lift about ten pounds with my mind (brain?) and throw it around pretty well. The ship simulated gravity at will, and we thought of rocks for me to work with. Small ones at first. The ship helped our minds create the rocks out of particles in space we passed by. It was slow going, even with the ship's augmentation. I thought rocks would be simple and easy. Turns out they were composed of dozens or even hundreds of different types of molecules, and my mind had to keep track of every single one when I put those simple stones together. Khelben guided my mind, but the human psyche can't keep thoughts that still or focused for very long. The rocks turned out looking like faces, letters, even sex organs. We all laughed at that and my inner psyche was exposed for all to see. Finally, I got simple rocks, and set about lifting them with my mind. It wasn't that much different than with hands, just imaginary hands. Imagination I had plenty of. Then into the week I accidentally lit one on fire when I was thinking about my job back home, and Khelben informed me that I had unlocked one of my elemental kinesis. Is that a word? It is now. Anyway, I learned to light things on fire. He said it went way farther than that, but I'd have to practice. And in the ship might not be the best place. I expected fire extinguishers to go off, but no... not in a Vasserian crystal ship. The flames went on and burned nothing, then went out once my focus wandered.

Karen had the gift of clairvoyance, which seemed to be seeing the present, past or future, with getting "feelings" about things. She was amazing at understand what anyone was talking about, even without telepathy, and translating it to others. She could read minds very well. Kind of scary well. She knew ahead of time when we were going to go through places in space that looked a certain way. She would say, "Oh, beautiful sunset," out of nowhere, and then hours later we would pass through a nebula with all the colors of dusk and a setting sun. Things like that. She was sensitive to psychic stuff, for lack of a better term. She said she felt our mission was going to be out of the ordinary, whatever that meant. I guess psychic stuff is vague and abstract whenever it wants to be. Not my cup of tea.

Avaril, on the other hand, was very quiet. She got a minor hang of telekinesis, and was pretty good at the telepathy and empathy, and she could even move air around, create water, and fire. She was ahead of me. But Khelben and our resident psychic both felt she had not yet hit her potential, even as a human mind. She didn't hit it that week, either. That came later, and let me tell you — it was worth the wait.

Of course, there was some small time for idle banter, which I adore. It was about time to get to know my partners in this shindig. We held long conversations over hours with each other, between trances. While one of us was powering the ship, the other two would talk. I had to do most of the talking with Avaril. Karen did most of the talking with me.

Karen worked back home on Earth as a game designer. She had written stuff for some of the more popular role playing games out there, some of which I had played. We had plenty in common. She had a sharp wit, a clever mind, and spoke her mind without hesitation, which I enjoyed. She figured, A) this was a dream, and B) we might never meet again, so what the hell. I suggested we all exchange phone numbers and get back in touch with each other when we get home. The girls seemed willing, but Khelben lit in with "Are you *absolutely sure* you want to do that?" All cryptic and ominous. We poked him for more, but that was all he said. Karen said that was like the old guy in a movie as he's dying telling the main character "Whatever you do, don't... Haaauuuuhhh..." And then dying before he could finish. I laughed and agreed, but the Stone Man (as I am fond of coming up with



nicknames for people) didn't budge. I gave the girls all my info anyway, everything I could think of, even my work address. I did it while peering sideways at Khelben, who was slightly grinning in a "Don't say I didn't tell you so" kind of way. I knew they'd remember it. Well, as Vasserians anyway. Once they woke up, who knows. It was just a dream.

Avaril was an extremely unique case. I mean Karen was too, but I understood her better. All of us in these highest incarnations were extremely attractive. We were the very best and brightest we could become. All of us were perfectly built for our body style, and our faces looked like poster-people models. But each one of us was unique. We looked out of the ordinary, even as Vasserians. Back home, I was told I looked "striking." I never knew what to make of that. I would have gone for handsome, cute, or hot, but striking? What's that supposed to mean? Karen looked at peace. She had this half knowing look on her face when it was at rest. Her eyes were soft and content. I guess I was more striking than I'd ever been. I could read myself very well. I liked how I looked, but could not tell how others perceived me. I don't think Khelben judged anything on looks. The girls were not as "vocal" with their feelings and thoughts as I was, and Avaril was just plain silent.

But her face, her eyes — they were what I imagined a real angel would look like. She had bright, almond-shaped upturned eyes, like an elf or something. Her eyebrows did a graceful upward curve above those eyes. Her nose was straight and noble, and below that her mouth was small, her lips thick and curved. She had a wide, softly sculpted jaw gently arcing down into a perfect, heroine-like chin. She was gorgeous. Not in a typical model way, but in an undeniable way that forced a reaction from my heart. Yes, yes, I fell for her at first sight, I'm afraid. Even back on Earth, I think. I realized it much later on. I'm a bit dense sometimes. This Vasserian self was just a much stronger version of her human incarnation. She was built like an athlete with wide shoulders and a broad back, and, sure enough, back home she competed in Ironman triathlons, water sports, and was a master of martial arts, specializing in sword fighting. That explained the intimidating stare. When she looked at us with no expression on her face, Karen and I both felt a power there, and normal people might have run away. She was scary, beautiful, and delightful all at once. She would break out into the most adorable, childlike fun in rare moments. She would laugh, giggle, and become unspeakably cute. It was so opposite her other side, and yet I knew that was her relaxed, true self. It melted my heart every time. Afterwards, she would close up again, and don her warrior's mask. But I saw her soul. I can't explain it, but Karen and I both did. There was a tremendously sensitive, deeply empathic person behind that goddess-like face. She was beautiful outside and in. It just made her more attractive, even though I knew in my gut she was extremely dangerous. Back home, when she wasn't competing (and winning) against the world, she ran a very successful series of businesses dealing in art and publishing. She was a super woman back home. That made me insatiably curious as to why her soul had been ready to make this journey. Clearly these two girls weren't suicidal, or even depressed. They both seemed at the top of their game.

Like the blunt-force-trauma creature I am, I directly asked, but even Karen didn't care to share. I felt I had crossed a line.

That's what I'm good at. All my life I had been called incredibly brave or very foolish. Back home, at the age of thirty-eight, I wasn't sure which was true. Probably both.

They didn't ask about my predicament, and I didn't offer after being shut down. I was working back home on not taking things like rejection personally. It wasn't easy for me. I had an emotionally difficult childhood which had continued to haunt me through what others preferred to call adulthood.

At last, we began spinning down our speed. We entered a universe that was ripe with life and light. Then we soared into a galaxy that was shaped like a cone, and into its center we sped. Near the middle of that cone, in a nebula of multi-colored clouds and bright stars, was a pair of twin stars, separated by about twenty light years. Both stars had once occupied the same solar system, long ago, and had been driven apart by some natural event.

Both stars had planets supporting life. But the one we were interested in, Muscila, was astoundingly Earth-like. Almost the same size. The same atmosphere. Younger, but the life on it registered at the same level as Earth. It had two moons, one larger and one smaller, both which had atmospheres and life on them. And the natives had developed interstellar travel only recently, meaning the last few thousand years. We saw starships in orbit, being built in stardocks, and at rest on one of the moons. They had numerous *space* ships, capable of travel within the solar system, but starships they only had a few hundred. They were in the process of being equipped and armored for war.

Khelben used his talent. We felt the energy, but noticed nothing different.

“We and the ship are now invisible to their senses,” Khelben said. “Even to physical contact. We don’t exist as far as they can know.”

I felt a bit more at ease. It felt sneaky, but better for everyone. During the journey Khelben had told us many stories of Vasserians making first contact too early. Other races almost universally came to depend on them too much, worship them, or resent them, and it often ended poorly. But what it did do one hundred percent of the time, every time, was change that race and their culture forever. It was considered a rude, inconsiderate thing to do at the very least, and a version of altering their free will. High Vasserian ranks felt that other races chose to be who they were, and even to learn the lessons they had set before themselves, and to remove that was akin to telling someone the end of a fantastic movie. Or giving them the answers to a difficult test they wanted to ace by themselves. It was in line with robbery of the soul. No culture would ever be the same again after meeting another species far more advanced. These beings were slightly past the danger line, having already met their neighbors (and fought them, apparently), but there existed in most civilized areas of existence coalitions of advanced races who set up “O-Zones” around races too young to be interfered with, where no other star faring race was allowed to go, until that growing species ventured out of their nest, looking for others. Then it *might* be okay, depending on circumstances. But Vasserians were not just another advanced race. They were *the* advanced race, and contact with them was inevitably chalked up to spiritual submission on the part of the weaker race. At that point, races would often stop trying to do things on their own, or freak out and go to war against every other race they encountered after their comfort zone was yanked out from under them. Some races were ready, but it was very rare.

Alpha Knights of Rank Four, the Sentinels, were powerful enough to defend entire races, systems, and galaxies, but almost always did so incognito, living on an asteroid belt somewhere out of range or detection from the species they were set to guard, watching over the millennia as that race evolved and made their own decisions. The Sentinel would protect them from stray meteors, huge cataclysms, sometimes from themselves, but always so subtly that the race never knew it. And they would watch. For millions of years, usually, until one day, that race built a space ship. And then one day a star ship. And one day, ran into a neighboring race. Then two, three, four, and more. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the Alpha Knight sent to guard that race would then go home, mission accomplished, having added one more sentient species to the pool of all existence, and no one ever knew what an Alpha Knight even was until hundreds of millions of years after that, if ever.

Of course, there were billions of variants of that story across the ages. There were stories of Knights falling in love with races and adopting them, getting attached. There were stories of Knights helping races evolve, behind the scenes, and thinking they knew best. Stories of Knights even by accident destroying the races in attempts to save them. Knights were powerful, and, as it turned out, fallible as well. Many of the super-advanced races in existence had had help from Vasserians one way or the other. There was no record of what kind of help was best. It was left up to the Knights sent out. But there were three universally held truths, learned over time and experience, that everyone agreed upon. One, interference, especially direct contact, always changed the culture. After that, no species was the same ever again, and the path they might have taken without intervention would be lost. Two, whatever happened, the Knight sent to guard them was responsible. Good or bad outcome.

And three, any race that actually was deemed worthy enough to have a Sentinel sent out to guard them were a bunch of lucky sons of bitches by any stretch of the imagination, because what all Knights *really* did was to guard against Zorians. And not nearly enough Knights existed to guard every growing race. Not even close. The High Councils of the Knight Legions had to pick and choose very wisely. For every race that was chosen to be protected, a hundred million would go without and be on their own.

For whatever reason, natural or Zorian, ninety-nine percent of those unguarded races didn't make it to star-faring levels. It reminded me of a National Geographic special I once saw, where beaches of baby birds were born out in the open in summer in Alaska. A million of them. And the foxes, weasels, wolves, and every other predator had a field day when that season came up. They ate baby birds at will. The parents could do nothing but watch their children die. But there were so many, the species went on in the end. Enough birds matured to carry on next year and repeat the same thing. I was a boy when I saw it, and maybe I grew up sheltered, but it seemed so unfair. You're born, and something eats you. Nothing can protect you. It's just a bad roll of the dice. So I grew up rescuing animals. Working for vets. Taking in strays every chance I got. Spending all my time and money caring for a house full of pets — getting kicked out of said houses for having them, and starting over. Like the birds. Like the races that weren't lucky enough to get a guardian, whether it be an O-Zone declaration from other, more advanced races, or, by a very, very lucky roll of the dice, an actual Alpha Knight.

Khelben was a Rank Two Knight. Not a Rank Four Sentinel. And we were, I don't know, Rank Zero? Rank Minus-One? But I think the bodies we were in were Rank Two as well, judging by the various shades of green we all wore. So this race didn't get a Sentinel, but they got *four* Rank Twos! So, does that make a Rank Eight? Probably not, since each rank was exponentially more powerful than the last. And there was no Rank Eight. But still, these lucky bastards. They did something to get Vashtarr's attention, didn't they? Maybe they warranted some horrible punishment... No, sorry... HA HA HA HA... There I go again.

Well, whatever the reason, we were about to find out. And I had to admit, I couldn't wait.

