

CHAPTER 2

A Summons of Three Souls

It took me from dawn until eight o'clock to gather my wits, and I was still shaking. I had to go to work. I couldn't eat. I skipped breakfast and my shower. Just threw on some clothes and went.

I was a fairly spiritual person. I'd done some studying. I meditate. My father had been a Native American shaman. I read science fiction and fantasy books. I was used to weird shit. But that dream had shaken me to my core. I could not forget one single moment of it. All the way to work I kept seeing it again and again. I almost killed myself on the road five times.

At work I was emotionally disturbed. (I often am anyway, but it was a great deal more pronounced that day.) I kept seeing — and worse — feeling, those gorgeous, luminous beings die horribly from black spike ray-gun disease, or whatever it was.

My thinking had been so much *clearer* in the dream.

I wandered about work, doing my job, waiting for time to pass, remembering how in the other world time had seemed almost a choice. I broke a few things, I got reprimanded once ("Are you on dope, Jared?"), and I almost pocketed a mouse. It was so cute, and looking at me with pleading eyes. I swear, I could almost feel its depression and terror. I had it in hand when I realized two things. One, I would be fired, sued, and imprisoned in that order. Some of these mice cost the lab well over ten thousand dollars. Second, the mouse had jumped *into* my hand.

They never did that. Not even to me.

This was a mouse mother with twelve pups, little teeny babies only two weeks old, just turning white with fur. Their eyes would open any day now.

Do you really want to run away from them, Mom? I thought as I put her back. But then, I couldn't blame her I suppose. Maybe she knew they were all doomed. I mentally marked the cage number, Row QL7, cage 7001.

I felt more than depressed. Everything in the world seemed dull, broken and wrong. I usually believed that everything had a purpose, that all suffering was for a good reason somehow — and that we'd find out what it was in the end. Now I wasn't so sure. I just wanted to be back in that perfect, more *alive* world. Even if it meant fighting black demon machine aliens.

The day went on for at least a million years or so.

That night on the way home I stopped at a place for food, and while getting my dinner, I happened to glance outside and froze.

A half block away stood a girl, maybe twenty-six, in a nice outfit, standing in line for the bus. The bus was parked and the doors opened. She was staring right at me with the same shocked expression I was wearing.

I abandoned my phone, wallet, and food and ran with everything I had for the bus. She stood for a moment, stunned, and then, waking to the realization that a complete stranger was running hell bent toward her, she made herself step on the bus. Her strikingly exotic eyes were still staring at me as she vanished from sight. The bus driver wasn't in a merciful mood that evening to see or care about the guy running for the stop, and the bus

drove off.

I stopped, heaving and puffing.

She had been staring back at me. Except she knew as well as I did that we weren't complete strangers. It showed on her face.

Aside from the different colors, she looked exactly like Aquilarr.

My phone and wallet were still there when I got back, a half hour later. I had spent thirty minutes sitting on the curb holding my head in my hands.

That night I was, once again, completely exhausted. I came through the door, let my bag drop to one side, and hoped I had closed the door behind me as I fell into my bed. The last thing I saw was the moon rising outside my bedroom window, the last thing I felt, the cold breeze on my face.

In my dreams I saw mice. And space. And black things.

And then I saw *him*.

Vashtarr.

He was standing in the lab with me, at night, on one of my graveyard shifts. He was standing there as plain as you please, with his Roman outfit, his softly blazing jewel-blue eyes, his sandals laced halfway up his legs, and his golden torque around his temples. The pearly white of his fabrics reminded me of the shine of a clean mouse's fur. His olive skin looked like marble. His white, almost light blonde hair was waving in that unfelt wind from another place. I stopped mopping.

Like most dreams, I just didn't find this unusual at all. Even though I didn't really know I was dreaming.

"Greetings, King Vashtarr," I said. I raised a hand up by my head, open and flat, palm forward. I knew this was their salute.

"Greetings, Jandren Jalharu," he said in a voice much softer and quieter than the last time I had heard it.

"Jared, Sir," I said. "Jacobson."

"In this incarnation," he replied, and smiled. His expression opened my heart and I almost cried in relief. I felt my entire being relax. I knew this man, god, whatever it was, loved me. I just felt it. For certain. No harm would come to me with him in my presence.

And I understood what he meant. He meant that Jandren, whose body I had possessed in the dream, had many millions of lives across time and space. My life was but one of them.

"Oh," I said, in realization of the scope of things.

He walked to me in two of the most graceful steps I have ever seen in any living thing. They reminded me of a panther and a circus performer I had once seen both at once.

"I have need of you, Jared," he said. "But I require your permission again."

"You mean I gave it to you last time?" I asked.

"You gave it to the crystal that transposed your souls," Vashtarr said.

"Didn't remember that part," I said.

"Your first success was a rare event. And meant to be. We didn't even know if it would work again. The distance is great. The time space vast."

"The two are different?" I asked.

"Quite," he said. "And the same. Distance is time and time is distance."

"Ah, okay," I pretended to know.

"Will you come?" he asked me. I could refuse this man nothing, not one thing, not ever. I had, after all, wished all day for a chance to go back to that dream. But I played hard to get, while understanding he would never force me into anything.



"Why me? And is there another?" I said.

"Because you are the close incarnation of one who must see a thing of great importance done, and they are incapable of it at this time. You must take his place," he said. "Yes, two others are awaiting our chariot," he added. I already knew who they were.

"What must I do?" I said, suddenly intimidated. I had no chance against those black things if he sent me in by myself.

"Save an entire culture from its eternal end," he said.

His face was dead serious.

I swallowed. Oh. That's all.

What the hell. It was a dream.

"Sure, I'll go," I said.

"It will be very dangerous, Jared," he said. "You could meet your own end."

"Last time I took the other guys place, I wasn't of much help," I said.

"We did not know when the crystal would transpose your souls then," he said.

"We did not know how it worked yet. In fact, many saw it as an accident. I knew it was fate." His eyes changed as his power grew. Now they were solid, brilliant white, without pupils and brighter than the sun. "It was a long time ago. Now we know. This time there will be no need for you to be so familiar with your disciplines of power."

"How... long ago?" I asked. "Wasn't it just last night?"

"For you," he said. "But the distance is great. So therefore is the time. For us, it has been over two million years."

"Holy shit," I blurted. I covered my mouth. Perhaps it was rude to curse in front of God.

"I am not God," he said, reading my mind and smiling. "We all are."

"You... won't tell me what exactly I have to do?" I said meekly.

"If I did," he said, "You would do that and nothing else."

I was confused. "Well, yeah," I said. "Of course. Isn't that what you want?"

"No."

"Then what?" I said.

"Something else," he said. "Something only *you* will do."

I looked at the ground. "That's why me."

"Yes," he said. "That's why you."

I looked up. "I'll do it."

"A second time I warn you, Jared..."

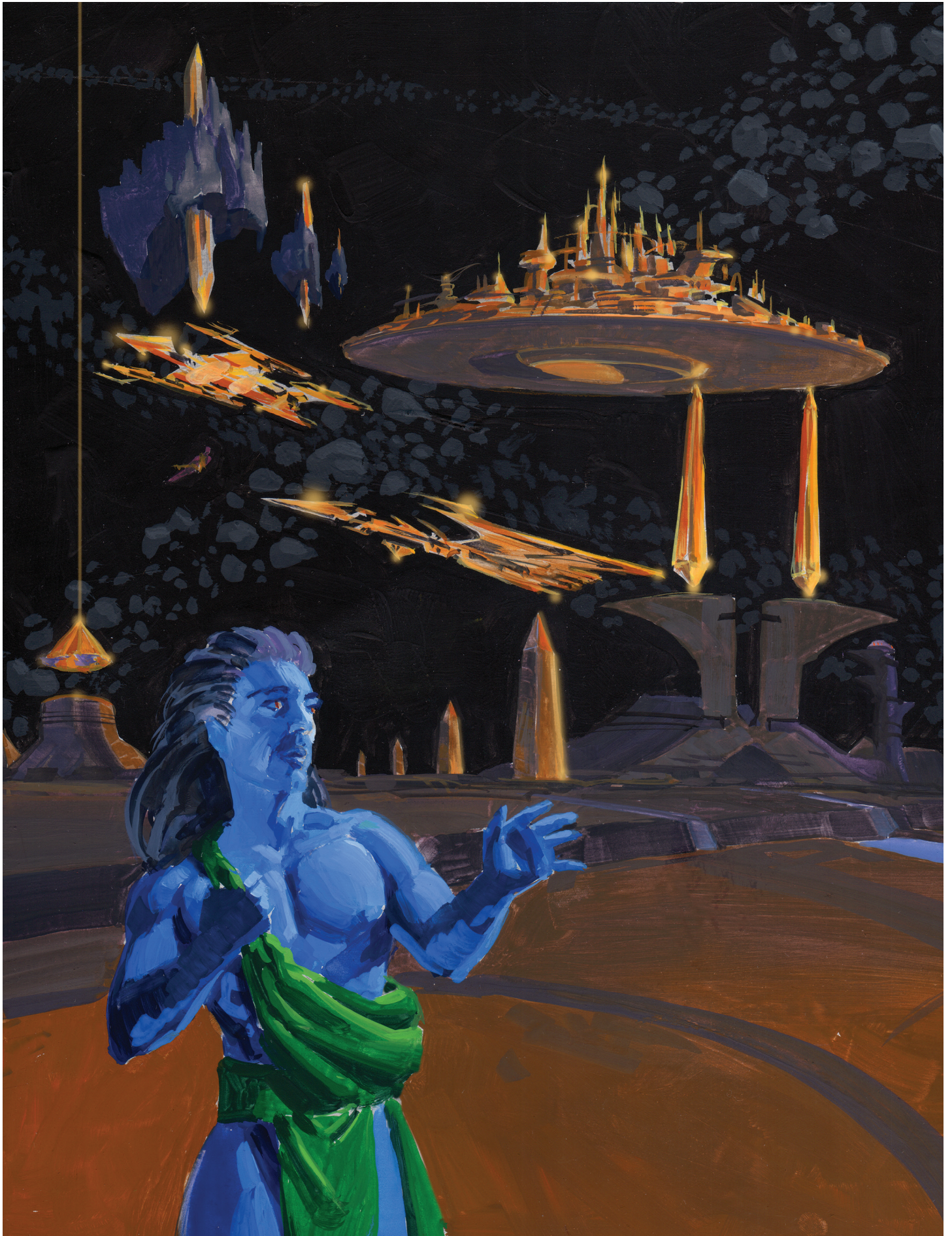
"Oh, I know how this works," I said. "I played D&D. I agree, I agree, I agree. There. Let's do this." A pause. "Why are you grinning like that, Sir?"

He almost laughed. I felt it. "You are not so different from your highest self, Jared."

He touched my shoulder and we were gone.

I had a vague sense of an unbelievable distance traveled. An immense sixth sense feeling that Earth was so very far away now. But it happened in an instant, and I had no time to contemplate it before we appeared in a new place.

It was the surface of a barren planet made of gray rock, with massive crystals of every color growing out of it like forests and mountains. The solar system had nine massive asteroid belts at different angles circling its sun, which was a beautiful orange. I immediately knew that the gravity of this planet was many times that of Earth, but my new body, the one I had worn in the previous dream, could handle it easily. There were buildings of all sorts created out of crystal, both transparent and opaque, ranging in size from small huts to gigantic skyscrapers.



The gray rock that the surface was made out of had been shaped and formed in every conceivable way, from sidewalks to citadels and arenas, buildings and towers topped with more of the perfectly shaped crystals. There were floating mountains, perhaps large enough to be continents, made of the same stuff, with crystals spanning miles across protruding from underneath. Some of the crystals glowed, some didn't. They took every knowable shape, from starburst shapes to faceted stones and gems, pillars and cubes, cylinders and strange, coral-like formations. There was no water or food anywhere in sight. But there were people. Sort of.

They... We... were known as Vasserians. From the open minds of everyone there, thousands of us, I knew the basics. We were the guardians of all that was. It had been given to us, the knights of our race, to defend all of existence that our Gods had made. And to that end, the laws that held it together were ours to use as we saw fit. As long as we understood how.

And this place (the planet Terreine), this solar system (named Urthus after its star), perhaps this entire galaxy (named Ravamere), was a military school run by some guy named Amour Lauth — for the training of our kind, in ways ranging from first contact and diplomacy to all out war against the one true enemy, the Zoriath. The black things. Which apparently were a trillion times more common than we were. Our numbers, in all existence — which was unfathomably larger than I had ever imagined — were thought to be in the neighborhood of seven million. Once we had been hundreds of trillions. But that was before the Big Bang. And the Zorians I had seen in my previous dream had been some of the softer, gentler ones. The Zorians had been killing us since before the beginning of time. There were so very few of us left. And so many of them.

I realized I was on my knees holding my head. My brain, infinitely faster and more clear than my human one, could handle all of this at once and not skip a beat.

But my mind, my soul, was still human. The knowledge I was absorbing was too much, too quick. I knew the age of existence. I knew my own age. I was 220,760,500 Earth years old. A year as I knew it being one rotation of my home planet around its sun. Our measure of time. Not theirs. They measured time in distance. And distance in time. I was overwhelmed. I had to turn it off.

And just like that, I was in silence.

Some of the Vasserians around me looked down at me, faces unreadable. I guessed (thank God) that they wondered why I had left the collective. *Sorry guys, just a human in a Vasserian suit. Surely you all know that.*

A saw a pair of sandaled feet before me. I looked up to see a man who looked like my friend Harry Lawson. Just like him except that this Harry had transparent sapphire blue crystal hair, liquid, reflective-looking silver for skin and his eyes were glowing irises, set in black orbs.

"Creepin' me out, Harry," I told him.

He smiled. Same smile. "I am Ko'rick," he said. "Not your friend Harold, though he is a part of me from long ago. I remember."

"I see," I said. "You remember that time you won my car at poker?" I asked.

"I do," he chuckled.

"Did you cheat?"

"I did," he said.

"Bastard."

"Yes, I do remember being determined to own that car. But you beat me to the rock paper scissors at the dealer, and thus I felt obligated to get it back somehow."

"How come you don't look all godly and in shape like everyone else around here?" I asked, looking at his large frame. Seconds later, he was a bodybuilder. His body just morphed into something ripped and muscular, right off a magazine cover.

"Whoa, shit," I said.

"My talent, Jandren. In your current incarnation you don't remember. I control my mass. I thought it might

calm you if I appeared more like Harry from Earth.”

“It’s Jared,” I said. “And your other self wishes he could do that.”

“I remember. Jared.”

“Go back. That’s disturbing.”

He went back to looking at least somewhat human. But he wasn’t smiling.

“You’d best be a bit tougher than that, my friend. For what the Council has in mind for you three. Your mission seems light for its lack of obvious conflict, but it carries a vital importance. I do not envy you.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “Give the lowly humans the important shit. Wait. You’re speaking English.”

“I remember English,” he said. “I remember everything. “But I am not speaking English. I am speaking Vasserian.”

“I hear English.”

“That’s because my mouth is forming English with my tongue.”

“But... Oh, whatever. Harry, you’re weirder than before.”

“I am my true self, Jared. Harry was but one of millions of lifetimes; only some of them as a human, and only some of them on Earth at all.”

“I’ll understand all this someday?” I asked.

“Someday,” he said. He had that knowing smirk Harry got when the someday meant a lifetime.

How long did these beings live? I wondered.

I got to my feet and Harry left the ground. He hovered in the air until I realized that with but a thought, like in dreams, I could defy gravity as well. All those flying dreams you have all the time, everyone? They’re real. That’s how you do it. Any way you want. Pull yourself up, push off the ground, pretend you’re Superman. Whatever. Vasserians all have telekinesis. Like telepathy, it comes with the package at birth.

We rose up into the wispy, thin atmosphere of the planet, miles above the ground and made our way between floating islands of shaped crystal that looked like streamlined starships. Then I saw there were people in them, all over them, training, glowing, casting lights and hundreds of energies of such variety that I only could recognize two of them. They *were* starships. I could feel the power they generated from being near them. Like the low throbbing hum of an engine, their vibrations were reflecting the Vasserians around them. And the students were using that feedback to do their training. All across the globe, groups of only a few to hundreds of Vasserians, wearing the colors of their ranks and stations, practiced at hundreds of different arts. I gazed into the sky and saw more in orbit around the planet. I knew they were the forces that made it turn. They made the entire solar system move. The many asteroid belts, offset from each other in three dimensions like the drawings of an atom, had Vasserians set throughout them, and I knew these students were moving the entire asteroid belt — calculating every movement and speed of every rock, from planet size to a pebble. All at once. Each asteroid belt had only perhaps several dozen individuals moving them. Harry told me it was called asteroid duty, and was considered a punishment of sorts. They were using only telekinesis to move and track all that matter.

“Only?” I said.

“They could use a thousand other methods,” Harry said. “Much easier. But they need to work on their TK. Knights must master all forms of energy casting and the other six continual powers before they think of attending missions or graduating one day.”

I marveled at the power of those minds. The brain I inhabited could do *that*?

“Not yet,” Harry said. “You’ve had asteroid duty before, but you’re only Rank Two. A gifted Rank Four might be able to move the entire belt. But each student is assigned their masses, which they memorize and manipulate to perfection before being given more.”

“Like the buckets of water in kung fu movies that get fuller and fuller as the guy gets stronger,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “I suppose so.”

I saw other students literally creating those crystal starships in a hollowed out moon with many levels and platforms. They hovered around it, meditating with one hand outstretched while the crystals formed like rapidly freezing water becoming ice, but out of nowhere. Rainbows and halos lit up the stone of the moon and the crystal ships. It was hauntingly slow and beautiful. I let a tiny bit of their telepathy into my mind and knew that this crystal was one of the densest materials in existence. Billions of times more so than diamond. It was hard to create from the scattered atomic particles of the moon. One part crystal required millions of parts moon. But there was no matter in reality more capable of conducting and amplifying power than these crystals.

There was so much going on. My Vasserian eyes could see it, and my brain could store the memories and process them like lightning, but my human mind could not keep up with the understanding. Correction, I suddenly knew that lightning was only electricity and electricity was one of the lower energy forms, and billions of times slower than what these beings were used to. Vasserian eyes, with their minds cranked up to speed, could watch lightning crawl across space for days. Days. Even the term was futile. One rotation of Earth to 360 degrees. Any Vasserian could understand the term, but I might as well refer to an ocean by showing you one drop of water.

So I stared and gawked as we flew through the soft-hued sky full of stars and nebulae, islands, continents, cities, and crystal starships, until we approached a floating disc made of crystal, with hundreds of bright, glowing towers upon it. A Vasserian cityship. A legendary rarity. There weren't many of these left. Most had perished before the creation of existence in the great war. Realizing my mind was open again, (it opened by default unless I concentrated on keeping it shut), I almost deafened myself again before I felt the others joining us.

Aquilarr's body (Oh my God, Aquilarr's body!) flew into my range of vision, traveling many times my speed, and in seconds was at my side. Her guide was a sharp, severe looking woman wearing orange. She had pearl skin, solid red eyes with no pupils, and polished, reflective jet black hair. I knew her name was Kas, and that she was someone of reputation in these parts — a great, feared warrior. Upon the shoulder of her armor, which most Vasserians only summoned for battle, was a kite shield shape with the number "7" on it.

Harry immediately saluted in a Roman fashion. Fist to the chest, then the hand to the side, open, flat, and facing forward, as if to show no weapons.

"Hail, Legion Seven," he said with deep respect in his voice. And perhaps fear.

Kas only glanced at him in response.

Oh, so Legion Seven was all that. The gods' gods. I got it.

Aquilarr was staring at me with her fiery amber eyes.

"Sorry I missed the bus," I grinned.

She didn't answer. She did not have that warlike gaze of doom the other Aquilarr had in my first dream. She looked concerned and slightly bewildered, as if not knowing what to say. Couldn't blame her. She had a human look in her eyes. This was a soul from Earth also.

As we flew toward the city, it grew immense. We were now traveling at thousands of miles per hour (there I go again), and it was taking forever to reach it. By the time we crossed the edge and passed through the shields, I was looking across a landscape as wide as California was long. It extended forever off into its own horizon. It had its own jade and violet atmosphere. It was profoundly beautiful, and sadly empty but for a very few Vasserians wandering every hundred miles or so. I realized that most of them were not knights, but the Vasserian version of civilians. Individuals who had not joined the fight, who could not even conceive of war or violence until the day they might lay their lives down (almost literally) for the cause and become defenders of existence. They looked happy. Naive. Innocent. Knights by comparison, clearly knew what they had signed up for by the time they had a few millennia under their belts.

On the way to the highest tower, topped with a massive golden crystal hovering over its peak and slowly rotating on its axis, two more flying figures joined us.

One of them was the body of Kylla Kao, but not her gaze. Her golden skin had a strange metallic sheen to it. Her eyes were pits of black with bright prismatic irises, like stars. Her hair was dark indigo at the roots, slowly fading through the purple and violet spectrums to end up in pearlescent lavender. There was another knight in armor with her. This one did not bear the number on his shoulder, and wore emerald green garments. Garments is the best word. Like a half toga or something underneath his chain mail. His sash flitted out behind him. His face was a somber set of piercing midnight-blue eyes, metallic-brown bronzed skin, and burnished charcoal black hair. He looked serious. He held his body in a practiced position of dynamic flight, like a dancer, or an acrobat. I knew this was Khelben Hawkstone, a Rank Two student, and also someone of reputation, though not “Legion Seven.” You should hear me say that with deliberately feigned awe in my voice. I’m a needlessly irreverent guy sometimes.

As if hearing my thoughts, Khelben smirked. It was halfway a “good for you” and a “Your gonna get your ass handed to you, boy” grin. He reminded me of a Marine I knew back home.

It’s okay, I can dis Legion frikkin’ Seven. It’s my dream. But to be honest, I felt across the connection how much these people revered that particular legion. They were legendary even to the legends. It was hard to dis them and not feel like I was committing true blasphemy.



