



Star Stable

# Soul Riders



THE LEGEND AWAKENS

HELENA DAHLGREN

# Soul Riders

T H E   L E G E N D   A W A K E N S

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Other *Soul Riders* books  
by Helena Dahlgren

*Jorvik Calling*

*There's no trick to being brave—  
if you're not scared.*

—Tove Jansson







There was a special spot in Lisa's heart with room for just one thing: the horse Starshine; brave, beautiful Starshine, with his soft muzzle and perfect, near-floating gallop. Fearful young Lisa had had such a rough life so far, and Starshine had gotten her back into the saddle again. Now that she thought about it, this spot had been filled for a long time, so much longer than she would have suspected. Ever since her childish preschool drawings of a gorgeous white horse with an unusual blue-tinted mane, this spot—this place in her heart—had tempted her, beckoned to her, with whispers of moonlit rides, dizzying adventure, and the kind of pure, uncomplicated love that you can only feel for an animal. This was the whisper that had brought her to Jorvik, to Starshine.

Of course you can love people, too. Lisa knew that. But somehow loving people was always harder. With people, there were always other considerations—so many other complex considerations.

Conflicts, arguments, demands, everyday life. People wore on each other. They were either misunderstood, said the wrong thing, or said something they might not be able to take back.

Loving a horse, on the other hand, was simple—that was really just unconditional love. And Lisa had learned that a person could grow and gain courage from this kind of love.

But Starshine wasn't here now. He was gone, kidnapped, and it was up to her and her friends to find him. She had cried so many tears, of sorrow and fear, panic and dread. She didn't have any tears left anymore. All she had left was simply the knowledge that they *needed* to find him. Which was how she came to find herself standing there, outside of the Dark Core complex. It towered over her like some sinister giant. In the gentle wind a wilted, yellowish-brown piece of grass tumbled forlornly past. A dry red leaf blew off a tree and landed on the cover of a well. Otherwise it was completely and utterly quiet. Almost too quiet.

But at the same time, it felt as if a hundred pairs of eyes were staring at the back of her head as she snuck through the fence into the seemingly deserted industrial area. Maybe it was more than a feeling. She had not been here very long, but she had seen enough to know that people could turn up from any direction at any time.

They might come off the frothy, black ocean. Or from any of the winding staircases and hallways. Or from the copper piping that reminded her of large, glistening snakes.

And then a few hours ago: from the sky had come an enormous helicopter with *him* in it.

Mr. Sands. Just his name, just the thought of him, made her skin crawl. When he stepped out of the helicopter, he had stood there for a while beneath its swirling air currents with his inscrutable black eyes focused on something above the helicopter pad. Lisa knew that there was no way, not from that far away, but from her hiding spot on the water tower, it felt like he was looking straight at her, through her.

He must still be in there. She hadn't seen him come out again, hadn't seen anything at all since she came down from the water tower and onto the grounds.

But she knew that she had to be on her guard.

She clenched the bolt cutters she had just used to pop open the fence. They weren't much of a weapon, not if the big workers in the green outfits she had seen go in the front door earlier turned up and grabbed her. Or if he did. Lisa shuddered. But the bolt cutters were something solid to hold onto, and that helped her hands stop trembling for now. She hurried across the grounds, not really sure where she was going. The big building—that was actually several buildings that flowed together—was like multiple islands in an archipelago. It reminded her of some evil knight's fortress, only made of steel and sheet metal instead of stone. There were thick pipes that led down into the ground here and there, as if they were sucking something out of the earth. It was easy to imagine the pipes branching out below the surface into a vast, snaking, underground universe. Who knew where it all ended? Lisa looked around and spotted several strange little buildings—various sheds for storage, some kind of a pavilion with paint flaking and a ramshackle cupola on top. Deserted? They appeared that way, but she could be wrong. She had to remind herself that she had been wrong before.

For example, she had believed she would get to ride Starshine during the fall break adventure and that her father would be waiting at home. The idea took root in her again, the one that had not left her since her father had left to work the night shift and had not come home again.

*What did they do to him? Where is my father?*

Her eyes burned as tears began to well up. But she couldn't fall apart now; she couldn't let herself think too much about her father. She had to have faith that she would find him, of course she would. But first she had to find Starshine. She needed him in order to accomplish the rest—his warmth, his strength. At the same time, there could be other possible leads here, she thought. Important pieces to the puzzle that could maybe—her heart fluttered in her chest—lead her to her father.



She tried to shake off the grief growing inside of her and returned to scanning the large industrial area.

The complex stretched along the coast like a dark lava field of asphalt and concrete. Smoke rose from the tall smokestacks sticking up out of the ground here and there.

There was a string of doors lined up in front of her when she reached the first wing of the building, but only one of the doors was ajar. Finally, an easy decision. She pushed open the heavy, metallic-green door. It slid open with a creak like long fingernails on a chalkboard. She winced at the sound and then she crept in.

Darkness. She fumbled around, feeling for a light switch, running her hand over cobwebs and wires. She wondered to herself, Didn't anyone ever clean this place? Apparently not. She had expected a big industrial facility would be more . . . orderly?

She took in the stuffy, dusty air, searching her scent memories—hay, dung, warm horsey bodies. Could she smell anything familiar, any kind of trace of Starshine?

But what did she have to go on, really? Doubt welled up in her as she stood there in the darkness. At best, coming here was a long shot. At worst . . .

No. She didn't want to think about that option.

Lisa sneezed and kept fumbling around until she found a light switch. One bare bulb hanging from the ceiling crackled and then came on. In the sickly greenish light, she saw that she was in a storage room. There were cardboard boxes, order lists, and big moving dollies with several boxes stacked on top of each other. She crept through yet another door—this time she avoided any creaking noises—and found herself in a long corridor. It was quiet aside from the distant, muffled sound of machines humming.

Mostly she wanted to just break into a run. She wanted to keep moving, investigate every nook and cranny of this enormous building.

Each door, each flight of stairs could bring her closer to Starshine. If he was here, of course. She tried to convince herself not to be too hopeful. This was only one of the places that Linda, Alex, and she had pinpointed as a potential hiding place for Dark Core. You could hide a dinosaur in that place. That's what Alex had said about the industrial complex back when everything had just been dots on a map and not real life yet. She had laughed back then, in that slightly intermittent Alex way that Lisa had grown so fond of.

Lisa missed Alex's laugh. She missed her friends—because they were her friends, the best friends she had ever had.

The only friends she had ever had.

Alex, Linda, Anne. And then Lisa had arrived, new to their class and to the stable. She had never dared to dream before that she could have a best friend, let alone three best friends.

She had scarcely been on the island of Jorvik for a month. Even so, so much had already happened. If she wrote everything down in a short story, maybe for English class, her teacher would probably accuse her of being unrealistic. Or he just might praise her imagination.

There were so many unanswered questions, but Lisa didn't have time for them, not now.

She forced herself to sneak farther into the building, slowly but surely. The hum was louder now than it had been in the storage room. The air felt charged with electricity, as if the atmosphere itself held a charge. She heard the sound of heavy footsteps above her. Lisa stopped, holding her breath, listening anxiously. Then she heard something new that crept into the rhythm of the sounds along with the footsteps.

Something familiar.

Could it be . . . ?

*No, impossible.*

Then a loud, piercing whinny echoed through the dark corridors, and Lisa no longer cared whether she was detected. She ran, ran, ran toward the hope of Starshine. Her cowboy boots echoed on the hard floor until she was no longer rushing forward. She was stuck. Something compact, baggy, and rough had hit her and stopped her legs, which wanted to keep running. It felt like her heart stopped, too.

She had just enough time to see the DC logo on the green cloth before she collapsed.



“Is this the right way, Meteor?” Linda asked.

The first light of dawn was just barely visible. The trees in Pine Hill Forest rose out of the dark cloak of night, slowly greeting the day. The whole world was gradually awakening, still clinging leisurely to the cool silence of night. One lone girl on her horse rode through the chilly morning forest.

The shadows that fell over her were dark blue. Not even the birds were singing this early. It would be easy to take a wrong turn and get lost riding in this silence, Linda thought. This was the sort of silence that belonged to thick drifts of fresh snowfall, not an autumn forest. A muffled, bundled-up silence. Each time she opened her mouth to talk to her loyal horse, who was walking along the scrubby forest trails, she thought her voice sounded more uncertain, more childish somehow. Obviously she knew that Meteor could not answer her, but he was the only one she could talk to now, the only one who could make the horrible, stifling silence go away even for a moment.

“We should have stuck together, Meteor, all four of us, just like Herman said. I have such an awful feeling that something is going



to happen soon, something really terrible. And I know we're the only ones who can stop it," Linda said.

Linda didn't know exactly how her ability worked. Yet. She couldn't choose which small glimpses of the future came to her, nor could she distinguish the dreams from reality. Possibly because reality was increasingly starting to seem more like a dream.

Meteor stumbled over a large rock. Linda lost her balance and almost fell off but successfully grabbed Meteor's thick, white mane. She could feel the heat from his body. Her fingers grew damp from his sweat.

"Sorry, pal," she said. "These aren't exactly like the riding trails around Jorvik Stables, but it shouldn't be far now."

Meteor pricked up his ears. Had he heard something that her human ears could not detect?

Linda, too, listened attentively now. Was that a faint birdsong that she heard in the distance?

"What is it, Meteor?" she wondered and stroked his soft, shaggy neck.

But of course Meteor did not answer her. Instead he broke into a trot on the trail. Linda noticed that the narrow forest trail had suddenly begun to open up into a big clearing and that something light and sort of flowing could just be made out through the dense, dark spruce forest.

It was the pale shimmer of the new moon, just visible in the lavender-blue morning sky. The moon seemed to be suspended, poised unusually low in the sky. She felt like she could almost raise her hand and pluck it from the sky. In the faint gleam of the fading moon, she saw the silhouettes of flapping bird wings. There was a heavy fragrance of flowers. The fresh, cool forest scent was gone. This was a completely different sort of smell that made her think of unfamiliar places and hot nights, more southerly latitudes.

She looked at the moon and a feeling blossomed in her that was just as familiar as it was unexpected.

It felt like clearing a tall jump with Meteor. Meteor whinnied unexpectedly. Linda blinked hastily. Suddenly she was overcome by the strange feeling that she was being watched. Invisible eyes burned into her back.

Should she turn around and stare straight into the whites of the monster's eyes?

"What monster? There's no monster," she reassured herself quietly, without actually believing it.

She did not turn around and simply urged Meteor onward. He carried them away from the forest at a gallop, away from scornful, watching eyes. With every galloping step, the feeling of being watched drifted off behind her. She let Meteor slow his pace and straightened up in the saddle. She wouldn't arrive at her destination for hours.

The sun was breaking through the clouds. Morning had arrived, and with it the feeling that anything was possible. True, she missed Alex and her friends, but she did have Meteor, her bestie who understood her better than any two-legged human in the whole world. Together they were unbeatable. She thought about the secret mansion waiting to be discovered. Pine Hill. What if Starshine was there? Or at least an important clue that could help her find him? Maybe it wasn't likely, but *what if*? For a moment Linda allowed herself to picture Lisa's joyful smile as she came riding in on Meteor with Starshine beside her. Her heart swelled, moved by the thought.

*Oh, Linda, how will I ever be able to thank you?*

She suddenly felt free and easy, alone with her horse on an early, crisp, clear fall morning, out on an adventure that had only just begun.

Whatever awaited her at Pine Hill Mansion, she was ready for it.



Alex remembered the magic. She couldn't feel it now, but she *remembered* it: how everything flashed and sparkled, the lightning bolt that had guided her. Jessica had collapsed on the ground in front of her as Alex had held her hand out in the air. She wore the necklace with the lightning bolt pendant as she rode Tin-Can through the chilly, deserted countryside in Winter Valley. As she headed for Cape Point, there were no more lightning flashes and no pink, pulsing beams of light anymore. In front of her were only empty plains and sharp, rocky outcroppings that seemed to say, "Stay away! Don't go any farther!" Everything here was gray or grayish-brown, like an old photograph that had lost all its color and luster. Alex felt like the loneliest person on Earth. She was completely cut off from everything and everyone—except for Tin-Can, of course.

"It's just you and me, guy," she said and picked a leaf out of Tin-Can's mane. "Always."

There was something about the solid grayness up here that made a person's courage dissipate away on the cold winds. The previous night's rains had left the ground wet and mucky. Mud splashed up onto Tin-Can's thick fetlocks. She decided that the next time she stopped she would have to pick out his hooves carefully, brush the mud off his fetlocks, and rub ointment into his pasterns.

She lightly touched her pendant. It was far too cold this morning. When the lighting came before, the metal grew so hot it

had left a burn mark at the base of her neck. It had hardly had time to heal.

What did this mean? Was the magic gone?

There was so much she didn't understand yet.

Everything felt muted in the cold morning air, almost like she was riding underwater. A viscous stiffness had taken over her arms and legs so that everything moved in slow motion.

She let Tin-Can trot for a while and tried to remember what, exactly, she was on her way to do.

"Save Starshine?" she said tentatively. Tin-Can neighed, a muted, rumbling sound from deep in his throat.

"Save the world?" she said and sat up straighter in the saddle. Tin-Can neighed louder now.

"Glad that's all cleared up," Alex said, ruffling Tin-Can's unruly mane.

She let him switch gaits, speeding up from a trot to a gallop as she thought about Anne. Out of the four friends, Anne was the one she couldn't get out of her mind during this long ride. Why hadn't she talked to the other three before she left? And where had she gone? Even more importantly: Where was her horse, Concorde?

Anne with her glossy hair and her steady eyes. Was she ready for what awaited them now?

Was Alex ready herself?

Heading out separately had been the wrong choice. She knew that now. They needed to be together, unified. Right now they were weakened, spread out across the entire island. At best.

*Epic fail.*

But once you had made the wrong choice, what could you do besides keep going?

So, she kept going, because that is what a Soul Rider does.

Alex longed for the lightning, for SOMETHING, something that would lead her in the right direction, away from her worries and the watching eyes of the beasts of prey that lay in wait in the shadows. She had felt their eyes upon her in the forest that morning, right from when she'd awoken from her uneasy dreams. It was so cold, so lonely. Not even Tin-Can's warm, furry body could warm her up.

Some seagulls sailed across the rain-laden sky. It wasn't far to the water now. Down at the harbor, you could just make out the light from the cargo ships beyond the bay. That was where she was headed.

"Come on, Tin-Can," Alex said, the hesitation gone from her voice.

The dark clouds in the sky flashed, suddenly a dazzlingly white. Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the lightning was gone.



## 2

• Anne could not remember when the world had turned pink, becoming pulsating and distorted. She knew only that she was not in Jorvik anymore. Time and space had dissolved. Days might have passed . . . or was it actually hours? Minutes?

*Years?*

The new unreality loomed around her there in Pandoria in the form of purple mushrooms. Yes, “unreality” really was the right word for her surroundings. The mushroom formations seemed to sort of sway in the air, forming a garish fireworks display of pink and purple shades. The sun shone, mercilessly bright, directly into her eyes. The ground swayed beneath her as she crept forward on all fours, toward something that in another world—her world—might have been a stream. Big, sparkling pink cliffs cut a sharp silhouette against the horizon. They looked like giant gemstones. Maybe there was a name for pink gems like that. Anne couldn’t remember.

She tried to stand up and fell over. She stood up and tipped over again. Finally, she managed to get to her feet, but her legs just barely held her up.

*What am I doing here?* she thought. No matter how hard she tried to remember, she couldn’t. It was as if she were inside a gigantic,



brilliantly colored centrifuge, spinning helplessly around and around, faster and faster. One time when Anne was little, she had ridden a roller coaster at a fair. She had gone on the ride again and again until the whole world was spinning and she threw up. There hadn't been anyone to hold her hair out of her face then.

Is that where she was now? Was she ten years old? Did she hear the same music from the spinning carousel horses?

*The horses, Anne. Stay by the horses.*

Did she smell cotton candy? Did she need to vomit?

Where had her mother gone?

*The horses. Don't forget the horses!*

But she forgot, she forgot again. The forgetfulness was soft and cozy, and so easy to fall into. She fell again, couldn't remain upright. There was something about the ground, the air, the light, the colors. Everything was strange. It felt wrong and she didn't belong here.

And yet . . . At the same time, she was *supposed* to be here, wasn't she?

There was something she was supposed to do, something important. Wasn't there?

"Please," she whispered to herself as tears ran down her cheeks, "FEEL something, anything at all."

She felt nothing, heard nothing. She could not smell anything. Had the smells remained on Jorvik? But things were spinning. Everything was spinning so much that she wanted to throw up, but she could not. Her body didn't seem to work the same way here. She was not built for this world. It was drawing the life out of her. Soon she would not even be able to think anymore. The thoughts that did come to her just pulled her even deeper into the bewilderment. Nothing was logical.

*Confetti, she thought. Pink cotton candy everywhere. In my ears, my eyes, my mouth. No thank you, Mom. I don't want any more. Please, Mom, no more cotton candy.*

Anne felt sick as she fumbled her way along past hazy, pink pools and small floating islands of barren rock. She tried jumping between the islands, like when she was little and used to play Don't-Touch-the-Floor in PE class. The air felt lighter than back home in Jorvik, as if the gravity was different. Everything was impossibly pink.

She was alone here, but inside her hopelessly spinning, dizzy head, things were starting to feel tight. Her mother was there, and that light gray carousel horse.

*The horse is important. Don't forget the horse!*

And now Alex was there, too . . . or *here*? Alex stood in front of her now in muddy riding boots, looking triumphant. Or was that not Alex? No, that had to be Alex. The bolt of lightning that hung around her neck flashed and made her light brown hair gleam pink. Her eyes looked completely black when Alex looked down at Anne where she lay huddled like a rag doll on those sharp, pink rocks. Around them the purple water was bubbling and fizzing. The shadows that had only been an inkling before grew longer and deeper. The shadows crouched down over Anne and Alex.

"This was a mistake. *You* are a mistake," Alex hissed into her ear, and Anne felt her warm breath dissolve the very last remnants of resistance in her weak body.

"You went off alone," Alex continued. "Just as well. No one else wanted to ride with you anyway. We kind of have other things to think about right now besides doing our hair. Girl, you need to get your priorities straight."

Anne raised her head and blinked skeptically, her eyelids feeling sticky. She heard what Alex said, saw her there in front of her—but

*was* that really Alex? The Alex she knew would never be so mean. Self-important or noisy, sure, but never mean.

“Who are you?” Anne whispered faintly.

The answer echoed dully through her throbbing head, but she did not dare believe it, did she?

*The anti-Alex. That’s not Alex.*

The Alex figure faded away before her, becoming a part of the pink shadows. She gratefully slipped back into the dark, sluggish unconsciousness, into a sort of trance, but somewhere deep inside the drowsiness, someone called to her.

Or, not called . . . but whinnied.

*The horse, Anne. I did say that he was important.*

“Concorde?”



# 3

At the top of the castle of steel pipes and winding hallways, Mr. Sands maintained one of his offices. You would think that a man in his position would have chosen the best view, but his office looked out over a sooty, dilapidated industrial area a long way from the city. The smoke from the smokestacks shrouded everything in haze, giving the sky a dirty, sulfurous yellow cast. In that light, Mr. Sands looked like he was at least a hundred years old.

The truth was that a hundred years wasn't even close. Now, the sickly, gritty sheen lit up every wrinkle and furrow of his face; every year showed, like the rings of a tree. He sighed and turned away from the window and his own reflection. He nodded briefly to the figure dressed in white who had crept into the room and come over to stand beside him without a sound.

"You're just in time, Katja," he said and sat down at his desk.

Katja still did not say anything—she just looked at him with her big eyes. They were so light gray that they looked almost completely white, like a corpse.

Mr. Sands leaned over his massive oak desk and spoke into his speaker phone. The reception was bad. It sounded staticky and words dropped out or were cut off.

"Generals, are you there?" he barked right into the microphone. "Sabine? Jessica?"

On the other end of the phone line, in a forest grove by her big, black horse, Sabine made a face and vigorously rubbed her ear.

"We're here, boss, but the question is if our eardrums are," she replied grumpily.

"Doubtful," mumbled Jessica, who was riding close to the cliffs between Cape Point and Anvil Bay seeking better reception. She sat still with her back straight and looked out at the ocean. Her face was tense and expressionless. The others' tinny, staticky voices were drowned out by the noise of the waves.

Katja smiled. Something happened to her eyes when she did that. It was clearly visible now: her eyes were milky white, not light gray.

"Generals!"

Mr. Sands's voice was like the crack of a whip.

"I want a status report," he continued. "What's the news?"

"One of them seems to be on her way to Cape Point," Jessica said, adjusting her hairnet. "I imagine she's headed for HQ. Obviously I'm planning to give her a warm welcome."

"Excellent," Mr. Sands responded.

"Try to stay on your feet this time, would you?" Sabine interjected. Jessica could definitely hear her triumphant smile and for a second it was like a fire flared up in Jessica's eyes before she sniffed dismissively. She would have preferred not to be reminded of what happened the last time she and Alex met, the disgrace of being knocked over by a little stable girl with lightning around her . . . No, she didn't want to think about it. She would never have thought that was possible.

“And the one with the glasses seems to be on her way to Pine Hill Mansion,” Sabine said, tossing her long, dark hair. Khaan, her horse, stretched his ears back following a sound from the trees. Sabine squinted her dark eyes but saw nothing. She sighed, hoping to wrap up the call soon and ride on.

“I’m assuming the third general has everything under control,” Mr. Sands said in his raspy, sandpapery voice, with a furtive glance at Katja.

“Of course,” Katja said and smiled her nasty, vacuous smile again. “It will be a true pleasure. I CAN show her the horse, too, can’t I?” she added, suddenly acting like a little girl pleading for candy.

“The horses must be sacrificed. You know that very well. They are needed to liberate Garnok once and for all,” Mr. Sands said slowly, almost thoughtfully, as he regarded Katja. “But why not use the horse we already captured as bait to lure the last of the horses here?” he added and smiled, a real sinister smile.

“But we have to wait until all four of the horses are captured, don’t we?” Sabine said. “They can’t be sacrificed to liberate Garnok until then, right?”

“That’s right,” Sands confirmed. “To succeed we need all four of them, or technically their magical energy . . . That’s why they need to be sacrificed. And it must happen soon, while the Pandorian flow is favorable. Therefore, it is important that you locate the girls and their horses as soon as you possibly can. In other words, we have one horse in captivity, and one in Pandoria. Now the two that remain need to be captured and brought to the lab for preparation before the sacrificial ritual.”

“And the girls?” the three generals wondered in unison.

“The only thing that interests me is the capture and sacrifice of those horses. If you capture the Soul Riders or put them out of



commission, that's a bonus. Then they can't try to save the horses or cause problems. These Soul Riders are far from skilled . . ."

"Concorde—my Starbreed," Jessica added with a weak smile. "I believe he is almost ready for transport from Pandoria to captivity now."

"Good. You have my permission to use the portal at HQ to get to Pandoria," Mr. Sands replied.

His pale, white spider fingers move rhythmically in the air, kneading some invisible object, slowly and artfully.

"Is there anything else you want, boss?" Jessica wondered over the staticky phone line.

Mr. Sands looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. "Yes, Jessica. I have indications that someone came to Pandoria to rescue the horse . . ."

"Then there's less time than we thought," Jessica said, half to herself, and urged her horse onward. They rode away from the coastline and into the forest. She was forced to duck to avoid the branches but rode decisively ahead through the wild surroundings. "I have to get to Pandoria before any of the others do. I do not intend to fail, not this time," she added grimly. "Never again. Whoever is poking around in Pandoria . . ."—she pictured Anne's face in front of her—"I promise I will destroy that person, and it will be a real pleasure to do it." Jessica was quiet for a few seconds. "I suppose I should find some reinforcements. I'm going to need to take care of the other girl who's on her way to Cape Point as well as the intruder in Pandoria."

Mr. Sands looked out at the industrial area where the burly workers in green were bustling around.

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Jessica. Sabine, on the other hand, I'm of the opinion that you do need extra resources," he said, staring hard at the microphone on his desk. "I'll arrange for a vehicle so that the

horse you need to pick up—the one that seems to be heading for Pine Hill—can be transported here as soon as possible.”

Those spider fingers again, they were moving faster now. He smiled to himself as he thought about what was to come. When he sacrificed the four horses, that would release enough energy to liberate Garnok. He had met Garnok several hundred years ago and had been granted eternal life then so that he could successfully accomplish just this: the liberation of Garnok. Although for him, personally, it may have been more important to get revenge for what the people had done to his Rosalinda. He intended to put right what had been done to his beloved. And he, John Sands, would make her queen the day he became king. Because once the liberation had taken place, Garnok would leave the planet, and John Sands would remain as the most powerful person on Earth. With eternal life he would be able to build an empire of money and power such as had never before been seen before. Not to mention taking revenge against all the pathetic people. It would be a real treat.

But time was of the essence now. He got up from the desk and stood by the window for a bit. The reflection that met him in the extremely clean pane of glass revealed an exhausted man, an aged man. Everything was intensifying as Garnok grew increasingly impatient. Soon time would run out on John Sands and all his dreams. In other words, failure was not an option. Never! He clenched his fist in his jacket pocket and turned away from the reflection in the window. The next time he saw himself he would not be able to detect any new signs of aging. Starting now, he thought, it would all go according to plan. He would appease Garnok and save himself. And all would be his.

He sat back down, straightened the red bow tie he always wore around his neck and said guardedly, “I really hope that everything is clear for you now, generals. I have a visitor to deal with . . .”