



THE
VISION QUEST

BOOK ONE: THE AGE OF LIGHT



ONE MIND
ONE WORLD

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CHAPTER ONE :

COLE LAZERMAN

A fist hit Lazer's face and carried with it the cold, hard smack of pubescent fury. Cole Lazerman, Lazer to his friends and family, was seventeen, handsome, and boyishly charming, with a thick head of dark, rebellious curls. He had piercing electric eyes, one of which had only moments ago been blackened. To add to the new color scheme, a trickle of blood flowed from his lower lip. His body trembled with rage.

Lazer recovered from the blow and retaliated with a left-right combination of well-placed punches that connected squarely with his opponent, Striker McMann. Striker was a tow-headed blond, big-eyed, weasel-lipped brute with no neck and big shoulders—a long-time rival and dedicated enemy of Lazer's since sometime during the summer before sixth grade. Both the fighters wore passage locks, an eight-inch braid of hair that hung down the neck of any young man under the age of twenty. The passage lock was often decorated with silver or gold rings and a few pieces of leather, stone, or feathers to mark a boy's individuality. It was required by law for any boy or girl prior to the Rite of Passage, and every boy who stood and watched the fight wore one as he cheered his chosen hero to victory.

Striker took Lazer's blows in stride and came back with a devastating one-two combination to the stomach and kidney that all but knocked the wind out of him.

"Cashton, do something!" Kyla pleaded with one of the boys. Kyla Wingright was one of the only girls at the skirmish and Lazer's oldest friend. Kyla was tough, smart, and pretty—almost beautiful but not quite, not yet. She was a second-generation splicer, with what looked like fine, flesh-colored tattoos on her neck and arms that fit the multiple ear and delicate nose piercings. Her strange, intricate markings were the only visible sign that she was not all human. But keeping your genetics to yourself could save your dignity and, in some cases, your life—especially in the outback of this partially settled, newly risen continent called Atlantia, which is where Vacary High School was located. Kyla nudged Cashton harder. "Do something," she pleaded again.

“What? Striker’s an ass. I can’t change reality.” Cashton shrugged. He, like the rest of the boys, was captivated by the action of the fight.

Cashton Lock was Lazer’s other best friend. He was older, taller, and stockier, with broad features and brown skin the color of amber and honey. Lazer had told him he looked like a fox, always ready to start trouble. The difference was Cashton had the body and build to finish anything he started. But this was Lazer’s fight, and the laws of machismo demanded Cashton stay back until Lazer let him know he was needed.

Kyla knew better than both of them that Lazer’s ego would never admit he needed anything, especially help.

A solid right hook to Lazer’s jaw sent him five feet backwards, slamming him hard into the trunk of a tree. Lazer bounced off and plowed into Striker like a human battering ram, sending them both stumbling backwards. They lost their balance and crashed onto the ground with a hard thud. Lazer scrambled to his feet with the agility of a cat that had landed on hot coals. Furious, Striker looked up, jumped to his feet, and ran back to Lazer at full speed, but this time he’d have to go through Kyla.

“Lazer! Striker! Stop it!” Kyla shouted. She stepped between them, her long sinewy arms stretched out in either direction. To everyone’s surprise, she sent out a double energy field that consisted of two spinning circles that spiraled in midair, barely visible but strong and solid enough to stop them in their tracks. The two boys hit the field and staggered, momentarily thwarted. Desperate to be the voice of reason, Kyla shouted again, “You can’t fight on school grounds. You’re gonna get us all kicked out!”

The two-foot transparent circles hung at face height, spinning in front of Lazer and Striker. Breathlessly, they glared at each other. Kyla held her ground between them. She wasn’t particularly talented at the Visionistic Arts, but she had learned a few tricks from her mother-enough to save herself, especially when fear sent a rush of adrenaline through her glands.

They were surrounded by at least twenty other students and every boy’s face was filled with the excitement of witnessing a hand-to-hand battle. Like bloodthirsty Romans out for a day of sport at the Coliseum, they wanted more. Not one of them hesitated to voice their displeasure at Kyla’s intervention, and they demanded that she drop her shields and back off. Kyla was in the way of today’s dose of violence and action.

This group of Vacary High School students were roughneck boys dressed in leathers and jeans, the “in” fashion of the day. Besides the cool t-shirts and jackets, they wore loincloths and tunic overpieces decorated with beading or metal studding in patterns that signified an array of things-from family history to status, sports teams, game-banger ranking, and clan associations.

“Give it up. You lost the game, Striker.” Lazer yelled at Striker over the crowd. “You and your lackey cheated.” Striker pointed to Cashton.

Cashton’s hackles went up. “Prove it!” Cashton stepped into the mix.

Lazer held Cashton back.

Striker, his nose bleeding, eyeballed Cashton with contempt. “Then it was a freak fluke that zocair ball came back to you like it was magnetized,” he shouted, pointing to underline his accusations.

“Fluke or not, you lost. Game over.” Lazer dug in deeper. “Don’t make me take you out on and off the field.”

Striker lunged for Lazer, knocking Kyla to the ground. Her arms had started to tremble, and she had released her tiny shields before they drained her and made her faint.

“Security bot. Ice out,” a red-headed splicer named Evvy Tiner shouted as she stepped in, nodding toward something through the trees. Evvy was a tall, lanky cross of human and perhaps orangutan and one of Kyla’s best girlfriends. She was a pretty girl of eighteen whose human genetics dominated everything but her round eyes, odd ears, and the amazing red hair that seemed to grow everywhere. Evvy was a tough outlander, tougher than Kyla, with a dozen inked tattoos that circled her forearms and weaved between the forest of fine red hairs that covered them. She had double the piercings of Kyla-multiple ones in her ears and nose, and a collar of silver pins that looked like a necklace. There was something about Evvy that made people not want to mess with her, but it was that same something that made them know she was just the person they wanted to watch their backs if the situation got rough.

Everyone turned to see a small camera bot encased in a metal ball. It floated through the forest of trees that grew on the back campus of the high school. Security bots, about the size of a softball, were all over Vacary High School. They floated innocuously inside and out of the school, going unnoticed by anyone who wasn’t committing an infraction against school policy. The bot cruised gracefully across the playing field and hovered twenty feet beyond the tree line. It dutifully spotted the crowd of boys and hesitated. Curious, it studied the odd gathering of students, assessed the situation and, sensing animosity, zoomed in for a closer look.

“You are too funny.” Striker threw his arm around Lazer and started laughing. Lazer knew the drill. He couldn’t afford a detention this close to graduation. It was his senior year, and getting off Atlantian soil was the goal of his life, so Lazer sucked up his pride and joined in the deception. The rest of the onlookers quickly got the message and started laughing as if the funniest joke of the century had just been told.

Cashton helped Kyla from the ground and gave her a bear hug to hide the fury

that was mapped across her face.

The bot observed the students for a moment more, then, reading no hostility, turned and zoomed away.

“You and me at the bilyon caves,” Striker hissed as he pushed Lazer away.

“You and me, and what weapons system?” Lazer’s face filled with a mix of anger and astonishment.

“Weapons system? They’ve been exterminated. It’s just a bunch of empty caves.”

“Are you stupid and crazy? There were two sightings last fall,” Kyla added.

“So, they got exterminated, too,” Striker glared at Kyla.

“Those caves are their breeding grounds, jickhead. They come back,” Cashton added.

“Cashton’s right, and so is Kyla. You’re crazy.” Lazer said. “I so can’t be bothered with you.” He flipped his hand and turned to walk away.

“Cheater and a coward,” Striker goaded Lazer.

Kyla saw it first. She watched his aura go from black anger to red fury. Reading auras was natural among splicers, and Kyla was a master at this art. Everyone at school knew not to lie when in her presence.

“Don’t let him goad you, Lazer,” she warned.

“I said, you’re a coward, Lazerman,” Striker smirked with an evil grin. “I thought that stench was from your old man crawlin’ up on all fours like a dog outta the methane mines. But, I guess it’s just you reeking of fear.”

Lazer was not a coward. He had fought hard to dispel the handful of incidents that happened in junior high school that, for a short and miserably unbearable time, had tagged him with the label of coward. He had gained respect after two years of black eyes and bloody noses, and he was not about to let an accusation-from Striker McMann, of all people-take him back down that horrible dark path, especially in front of the meanest boys in school.

“Call it, jickwad. I’m on whenever you say.” Lazer was adamant.

Striker strode over to him and got in his face. “Now. Old bilyon caves.”

“Are you both crazy?” Kyla blurted. The reality and danger of what Striker was suggesting sent a rush of panic coursing through her veins as cold as her non-human blood.

Even Cashton had to chime in, “That is way not a good idea.”

Striker turned to walk away, then stopped to taunt Lazer over his shoulder.

“I’m waiting. Or are you so low on the food chain you don’t have the class to see an opportunity when it’s presented to you . . . coward.”

Lazer’s eyes glazed over. Any amount of control he had over his anger had just vanished. “Game on.”

The crowd surged forward. They had no intention of missing this massacre.

Lazer held up a single hand. “Alone,” he said to the crowd. “Nobody but us. This is personal and, that way, if we get busted . . .”

“Or eaten,” Kyla cut in.

“. . . no one else gets in trouble,” Lazer finished his thought, shooting a look to Kyla.

Striker agreed, signaling his crew to back off.

Kyla’s eyes stretched wide as she turned once again to Cashton for help.

“Cashton, please do something!”

Cashton moved after Lazer. If Lazer were going to fight, Cashton would be there to back him up. Lazer and Striker strode off to the perimeter grids that surrounded the high school. Striker’s second, Chad, fell in step a few feet behind. Cashton and Chad eyeballed each other with “bring it on” intent.

“Just us. No seconds,” Lazer turned back to Cashton.

Striker gave a nod to Chad, who got the message loud and clear. Cashton and Chad stepped back, allowing the duelists to proceed alone.

“Unbelievable,” Kyla muttered in disgust.

“Now what,” Evvy asked, stepping next to Kyla.

“Try and stop them. Keep an eye out for any bots,” Kyla told her. She had no choice but to run after Lazer, her mind reeling, desperate for a solution to quell the testosterone surge that had been unleashed between them. Evvy nodded and Kyla took off.

By the time she caught up, Lazer and Striker had reached the fence. Lazer pulled out a seven-inch laser switchblade that ignited, glowing a fierce red from shaft to tip. It protruded from a sleek bronze and silver tube handle, complete with mother-of-pearl inlay in the shape of a mythical dragon, its wings and tail wrapping gracefully around the shaft. Laser blades were illegal on campus, but everyone who was anyone had one. Lazer had three, once upon a time. His parents had confiscated two before he bought this one in Atland City three months ago. He’d gotten it off a lizard-faced splicer who specialized in exotic splicer pets and small weapons.

Lazer calmly started to burn a five-by-five foot square in the electrified-proton field that surrounded the campus. “We’ve got twenty minutes before that starts to repair.” Striker looked back over his shoulder to make sure the coast was clear.

“Rematch,” Kyla shouted, bounding up to them. “Let’s set a zocair rematch and do this right.”

“Back off, splicer. This is right.” Striker sneered at Kyla.

“Watch it,” Lazer defended Kyla. He had been best friends with her long enough to know that being called splicer, especially by a bigoted creep like Striker, hurt and embarrassed her. Lazer grabbed Striker by his tunic.

“Lazer!” Kyla reached out and gently placed her hands on Lazer’s. “He’s not worth it.”

“Trust me, I am,” Striker smirked, challenging Lazer one more time. “A hundred yards more and you can rip me a new face.” Striker tore himself out of Lazer’s grip and stepped through the proton fence. The edges sparked and snapped, already searching for their lost connections.

“Sorry, Kyla, he’s a jick,” Lazer said, gently laying a hand on her shoulder to make her feel better. “Go back, okay? We’ll be done in twenty minutes . . . tops. Go.”

In the flash of a moment, Lazer and Striker were running away from her. They quickly vanished over the rolling red- and sand-colored hills of the Atlantian outback and disappeared into a thick outcropping of trees that circled the mitten-shaped granite plateaus that populated the region. Lazer, Cashton, and Kyla used to call them giant, stubby-fingered hands trying to get out from under the ground.

Kyla looked at the closest plateau. It loomed 300 meters high with its flat rock face, pockmarked by a thousand black caves. For seventy years, since the early days of Atlantia, the bilyons had claimed the caves as their breeding ground; it had taken years to clear them out. The bilyons were a man-made species-genetically crossed splicers, half-lion and half-bear. The males were known to grow well over 2,000 pounds. They were, by the genetic predisposition of both breeds, ferocious and extremely volatile. There had been a consolidated effort for five years by the Vacary Township community, when they built the high school, to hunt the bilyons down and exterminate them. Those that survived the slaughter had stayed away. Four years passed without incident, but the multiple sightings last year disturbed the residents and never yielded a kill. Everyone was nervous at the thought the bilyons might be back, and the impending danger made Kyla’s stomach turn.

Kyla looked at the hole that still gaped in the proton fence. It had already begun to shoot tiny fingers of electrified proton threads out from the edges. They were searching for corresponding threads to connect to, bond with, and rebuild the almost invisible web-like structure that made up the fence. Kyla hesitated, sighed, and went through the fence.

She glanced nervously at the plateau one last time. Maybe I can talk some sense into them, she thought. Kyla ran towards the dense forest of oddly-shaped trees and headed for a tangle of bamboo that grew in a perfect ring around the base of the plateau.

The warm sun quickly faded beneath the canopy of the forest, then vanished completely under the looming shadow of the plateau. The cold granite of the rock wall reached up into the pale, cloudless sky that was trying to peek

through the clutter of leaves. Only a narrow clearing broke the canopy, and Kyla could not help but glance up at the majestic formation as she ran. The plateau seemed to look down at her, staring with a hundred black eyes-the caves that had been scratched out of solid rock by generations of bilyons. Kyla hoped she was wrong about any of the bilyons being back in those caves. She pulled her eyes away from the plateau and caught sight of Lazer and Striker heading into the bamboo forest.

She had shifted her gaze from the plateau, but something inside one of the caves had not returned the favor. There, in the silent face of the rock plateau, a pair of yellow eyes peered out from the blackness of one of the lower, larger caves. Two huge, round eyes caught the light of the afternoon sun as they moved back and forth from Lazer and Striker to Kyla. The mysterious eyes watched the approaching students. Lunch had been delivered today.

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