

## CHAPTER 14

### *The Dharma of Quilah*

In those months before everything got really gnarly, and I mean *extremely* gnarly, Quilah and I had many good times together. We went everywhere, talked often, and he showed me his planet. It was rapidly changing. It would never be the same, he said. And neither of us knew how right he was.

But before that happened, we had a long peace before the storm.

Karen and Avaril spent their time divided between Quilah and the fleet. They went out on missions with ships to protect them as best they could. Their powers grew with use, like budding flowers eager and yearning, fed sunlight and rain all day long. They fought the war with the Murines and the mice never even knew they were there. The Atraxians knew something was up. They listened in on their transmissions. Their language was very similar to the Murines. Eight thousand years wasn't enough to grow so far apart in some ways. Apparently the Atraxians had a military monarchy going, with one ruler who commanded with an iron fist. We never heard him in their signals, but they worshiped him and feared him. He sounded as brilliant as Hali and as strong as Cowboy. But he remained unnamed. They just called him the King Admiral. We thought about assassinating him... Such a human thing to do. Khelben vetoed it, of course.

Karen grew very fond of Lily, and spent time with her even though the girl couldn't hear or see her. The rest of the time, she spent with Cowboy, though he didn't need it. He was grumbling about unfair treatment for war heroes while still working his furry ass off to climb the ladder of the system and get what he demanded (and what he justly deserved, according to him). He was single-mindedly focused on his studies and tests. Completely obsessed. He didn't want any help from us (he was top of his class), so we left him to his task. Avaril checked in on Hali, but that genius was skyrocketing through the ranks, also with little of our help, and would probably someday rule the mousey world if he wanted to.

We all knew that somehow, our job was about Quilah. He was special.

Avaril was with me and Quilah a good deal of the time when she wasn't "working" as she called it, fighting the good fight. She very slowly let her guard down with me. We had laughing, hilarious moments. We had arguments. We had long periods of flying around the moons once we learned to generate our own air and contain it with TK. Our bodies would not freeze in the depths of space. It felt like we were gods. We tried not to let it go to our heads. It seemed that I would earn a tiny bit of her trust, then lose it, then earn it back, only to lose it again. It was somewhat fascinating, frustrating, and enchanting all at once. She was an astounding woman, and being Vasserian only made her more so. But it was clear to me she had gone through something terrible. She had come out strong as hell, but her armor was impenetrable unless she let me in. And I had this nasty habit of trying to force issues. Quilah told me to relax and stop trying. I just couldn't get that down. It seemed against everything I was made for. It felt impossible. I often felt inferior around her, even though I knew better. My self esteem had taken some mortal blows in my last several years back home.

Nonetheless, she spent most of her free time with me. We liked each other, and she showed it to me in her own way. It was like being friends with a tiger goddess samurai. As long as I wasn't nervous, maybe she wouldn't

eat me.

Karen spent much of her free time meditating, communing with nature, and in the ethereal state of visions and dreams. Her clairvoyance sent her all kinds of images, places, sounds, and feelings. She sometimes looked like she was in danger of not coming back. She was exploring the planet with her mind, while her body sat in lotus position in the upper atmosphere, riding winds. Then she went further, out into deep space, which she said was anything but empty. She was sure that the sun heard everything they said; knew them intimately. She would speak to it. Her special talent of seeing souls grew to seeing the spirit world whenever she willed it. She was fast becoming some kind of enlightened being, and enjoying every second of it. She finally stopped going on ship missions. She said the needless taking of lives made her sad. It made the whole universe sad. She was the first of us to exceed Khelben in anything. She could tell without effort where there was trouble that needed solving. She could see the whole planet at once, send her mind anywhere she wanted to be instantly. In this gift, she became very powerful, and though it seemed to consume her human side, she stayed the course with us.

Khelben was content to hang out on the ship in the asteroid belt. He said that's what most sentinels did — not interfering, he pointed out. With Karen's help, he watched everything. He saw all. Not really exaggerating there, either. He always knew what we were up to, as long as we were within the solar system. He made it clear that if we left, like before, we were on our own. He himself left time and time again to scout Atrax. He was sure there was some dark influence on those twisted creatures, but he couldn't find it. It frustrated him. Perhaps he wanted an excuse to wipe them out and be done with this mission, but that was more projection from me probably. He told us missions like this more often lasted more than one hundred thousand years. We heard that and were struck silent. That put a new slant on things. We almost settled in for the long haul. Almost.

Then, one day, fate shifted slightly and things changed. Again.

I sat with Quilah on the wall of Lily's house, by the garden while Lily worked happily growing food.

"I haven't run this by the others yet, but you could become, like, a wandering prophet," I said.

"What's that? Why does it wander?" he asked. I laughed. So cute.

"A prophet is a dude. A guy... A mouse... I mean Murine. Anyone. Who wanders around and tells people how it should be. They don't listen, and usually end up killing him."

His ears went straight. "Why would I want to do *that!*"

"Well, you can heal people, Quilah. I know your brothers told you to stifle that deal, and that was likely the safest course, but you don't seem happy with that."

"I'm not," he said. "Lots of people need healing. If I can do it, why shouldn't I?"

"Right," I said. "I mean, they'll kill you, but what the hey. Prophets go down all famous and get into books."

"Don't wanna be famous," he said. I was about to speak when he interjected, "Might be fun to be in a book."

I smiled at my friend. "I'll make sure of it," I said.

He smiled back.

"Anyway, you're out of a job. You need to live. A little late to go back to the gutter," I said. "Lily needs to keep her house."

"Hali will cover it," he said. "I can't tell anyone how things should be. I don't know how things should be."

I turned to look at him seriously.

"Yeah... Yeah you kinda do, Quilah."

He looked puzzled.

"You think differently than other mice," I said. "You are way ahead of them. IF they survive this war, they're going to need thinkers like you to teach them to get ahead and stop doing stupid things out of old, habitual instinct."

"They won't listen to me. I'm..."

"Shunned, yeah I know. See, that just sucks. Another thing that has to go if your society is ever going to..." I



thought about it. For awhile. Two seconds. “You know, maybe you really should do it. I was joking, but maybe...”

He looked worried. “Why?”

“They would have to face what you can do,” I said. “They’d be forced to deal with something they can’t understand. It might do some good. The healing thing is just... out of the box. On my planet, only messiahs could do that.”

“Messiahs.”

“Super prophets.”

“Oh. Even better. What happens to them?”

“They usually die horribly also. Because my race is really not very evolved yet.”

“Are you *sure* you’re not a Taker?” he giggled.

I made a wide-eyed face and shook my head *no*.

“You could help us save your race,” I said.

“What!” he chirped.

Aww, shit. I think I blushed a lighter color of blue.

Oh well. The cat’s out of the... Ah, the mouse is out of the... Yeah, the jig was up.

I turned on the wall to face him. Effortlessly he snapped to his feet and faced me. Squatting on his hind legs, his face was level with mine.

“Quilah, I trust you,” I said.

“I trust you too, Jared,” he said. “I just know you’re a good person. It’s not just how you smell. I just know.”

I wish I agreed.

“Alright, well,” I said. “I have some stuff to tell you...” I winced. “And I’m going to have to break some really important rules to do it.”

“Don’t get in trouble on my account,” he said.

“You need to hear this,” I said. “And it’s past due, in my opinion.”

“Okay,” he said.

So I did it. I spilled my guts and told my friend everything. I told him we were humans. I told him it was a dream. I told him about the Alpha Knights, the Zorians, our powers. Our mission. Incarnations. The way the universe worked. Everything we had learned and been through in these bodies, and back home, for that matter. Everything. It took a few hours. He sat perfectly still and listened to all of it. I didn’t know mice could do that. The only mice who sat perfectly still in the lab were asleep or, more often, dead.

When I was finally done, he sat there like he was carved from marble.

After looking at him in silence for a few minutes, I said, “Quilah?”

He looked like someone who had just realized his entire life was a tiny stage, because he got an accidental glimpse of the entire theater and the city is was built in. As I watched his mind blazing at a million miles an hour, his face got brighter and brighter, as if more and more certain of some stupendous revelation. It was almost scary. I think I was watching Quilah come into his true self. It felt like that. I had no proof. Just a gut feeling. In those moments, he felt more... real. More solid, more grounded. That lost, uncertain aura of his just left him. And never came back. His eyes became very bright indeed. It was like watching someone wake up after being in a coma all their life and realize what they were born for.

“Quilah?” I repeated. I hoped I hadn’t broken my trusting friend. Khelben warned us that even just knowledge could do it.

“Um,” he said.

Play it off like it’s no big deal, Avaril would have said.

“Oh yeah... Aannnd you aren’t supposed to share that with anyone. Okay?” I said. “I forgot to get your word of honor first.”

“Kinda late nowww...” he said.

“Nah,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Nah,” I said.

“Gonna tell *everyone*,” he said. Oh good. He was still sane.

See? That Shaolin story...

“Quilah, you can’t... It’ll mess things up... I’ll get in trouble...”

“It’s only a dream, right? Who cares, right?” He said, grinning.

He had me. He was having a laugh at my expense. A good one, too. He wasn’t going to tell anyone.

“You little ROE-dent!” I said, and gently knuckled him on the head. My hand went through him, of course.

He giggled and ran across the yard. I chased him past a grinning Lily who knew something was up.

We got inside the house. In what passed for the living room, he got some food out and began munching.

“I’m in,” he said.

“In what?” I said.

“The plan,” he said. “Saving my race. Count me in. Can I be an Alpha Knight too?”

“Umm. I think the bus is full. Not sure how to switch your soul out, either. We can talk to Khelben... But probably not.”

“Okay, then prophet mouse it is.”

“I was mostly joking, Quilah.”

“Yeah but not really, right? It *would* make them listen. It’s a good plan.”

“They’re gonna kill you, man.”

“Nah. Might not.”

“Mice kill each other over a splinter!”

“You said humans are much worse.”

“We are, but... but...”

“Besides, I have an Alpha Knight to protect me! No *way* are they gonna take me.”

“Dude, I wish that were true, but we’re not very skilled or powerful yet, and may never get there this trip.”

“How much telekinesis you got?” he asked. “You did a number on the ship.”

“I don’t know. Everything is getting stronger really fast, but we’re still not anywhere near Khelben... Not even a fraction.”

“Let’s test it.”

“What do you propose, good Murine?”

“Come outside.”

So I did. A light sideways rain full of sparkling lights and violet-orange rainbows covered the sky. High above, amber and gold clouds moved rapidly over the city.

We ran out to the old grove where we had first met. It was still peaceful and quiet, leading out into further wilderness beyond. It was a whole separate world from the military base and starport city. The bee-things were happy to see Quilah. The squirrel-things came out to greet him. The birds circled around his head to say hello. We sat there in the topaz rain, sunbeams crossing through it as the sun slowly drifted toward the horizon, creating the prismatic rainbows and turning every raindrop into a sparkling gem in its few seconds of glory. It was beautiful.

“Okay, go for it,” he said finally.

I lifted rocks. It was almost effortless at first. It was a lesson in perspective. I lifted and lifted and lifted until I had a mountain of rocks circling over our heads. A city blocks worth. Thousands of tons. I was astounded. It was easy. I was reminded of asteroid duty. This was how they did it. It wasn’t hard to keep track of all of it. It flowed.



“Wow,” Quilah whispered. “That’s... A lot more than I thought you could do.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. I looked at my hands. I don’t know why. I always made Magneto-ish gestures when I used my TK, but that was just for flair. A Knight didn’t need to move at all to do much of anything.

“Okay then,” he said. “This is just one of your many powers. I feel safe. And... I think I finally... I finally have something to say. To everybody.” He looked very serious. No longer a boy. It had happened so *fast*.

I set the stones down in a Stonehenge formation around our grove — stacking some of them neatly, planting others vertically, arranging them in line with the astronomy of Muscila and all its surrounding stars. I made a calendar, a clock, a wheel of power. It was just like the one back home. Now I thought I almost understood. I had begun to see how everything was connected. Just a tiny, tiny peek. The scope of it was beyond me. And, apparently, even beyond most Vasserians.

We walked back home. Avaril, Khelben, and Karen were waiting for us.

They knew what was up through our link. Mine was always open. Khelben’s was always closed. Avaril’s was open only when she needed to send something or share something without taking the laborious time speech required. Karen was open half the time.

“So you know what we’re up to,” I said. “What do you think?”

“I think he’s going to need protection 24/7,” Avaril said.

“I think it’s a great idea. Let things shift. This planet, this war, needs to change. Quilah can do it if they listen,” Karen said. “I’m behind it. It’s way better than fighting.”

“I think it’s more interference,” Khelben said.

“Of course you do,” I said.

“Has it occurred to you that I might know a thing or two after watching more than ten thousand cultures grow, be tested, and wither, die, or move on to the stars?” he asked. “I warned you.”

“Khelben,” I said, surprised. “You sound emotional. Are we rubbing off on you?”

He turned his head sideways. “No,” he stated sharply as if it was irrefutable fact.

“Will you allow it?” I said. He looked back at me. That was the first time I had asked for permission. Maybe Quilah and his theory of non-resistance was rubbing off on *me*. He looked resigned.

“I will not prevent it,” he said. “This is your mission. I am just the guardian.”

We all exchanged glances, and with those, feelings. It was decided.

I turned to Quilah.

“Okay, buddy. It’s your show now. This is your planet.”

It turned out Quilah had been ready for this for some time. Maybe all his life. We expected to do most of it for him. Not even close. He had his own runway and wings. It ended up being *him* that took *us* for the ride. Not the other way around.

The first thing he firmly wanted to do was go see his friends. We went to see Cowboy first.

“You’re going to do *what?!?*” he said, not looking up from his studies of a 3-D wartime map. He was teaching at the school now, and he was preparing for his lesson in tactics class. In a few months he had mastered every degree the school had to offer, and he was mad as hell they still wouldn’t give him a command. Maybe he was just too good at teaching. “I forbid it,” he finished.

“Cowboy,” Quilah said gently, “You can’t prevent it. All you can do is give me your blessing and back me up, like old times.”

Cowboy now took his eyes off the complex hologram. He looked perturbed. He almost looked mature.

“Quilah, they’ll kill you.”

“I know they’ll try,” he said. “But the Beholden won’t let them. They’ll have to consider their ways, consider change.”

“They’re still here?” he asked. “Weird ghosts. I wish they’d just go home. They’ve interfered enough.” Khelben

was looking at me. I could feel it. I didn't dignify his stare with a glance back. "Not that I mean to sound ungrateful. We are alive because of them. But I just... get a bad feeling about the whole thing. It feels unnatural. And now they tell you... You're... Susceptible to influence, Quilah." Cowboy came up to Quilah and put his nose on his forehead. It was the most affectionate gesture we'd ever seen him make.

"Quilah, I love you, brother. I do. You've always been gentle and sweet. Gentle and sweet Murines get killed. Ignored. Shunned. Honestly, we didn't think you'd make it this far. We were just trying to give you as good a life as we could for as long as we could. Feed you. Keep you warm. Show you you had a family." He sighed. "You never really belonged in this world. It's violent, and risky, and scary to most. It's a world for the strong. It has no kindness in it."

Quilah scooted a little closer to his friend and buried his nose in Cowboy's dutch fur.

"You're wrong, old friend," Quilah said. "There is kindness and love everywhere. You have to deliberately choose another path to miss it."

Cowboy let his shoulders sag a little.

"You've chosen your path, brother," Cowboy said, pulling back to look Quilah in the eyes. "And I chose mine. We'll find out who was right in the end. I'm sorry to part ways now, but you no longer need me. "

Quilah turned for the door, a bit sadder. "There is no right and wrong, Cowboy," he said. "No good and evil. No path better than another. Your way is fine. This is what you want. In the end, we'll both be right."

"That makes no sense," Cowboy went back to studying his map and scenario of war. "But good luck to you. I will always wish you well." He looked across the room at us. "I hope you succeed. I do. But if you don't..." his eyes got hard. Harder than I'd ever seen him. He truly looked formidable. "I will be there to do what needs to be done."

Quilah nodded and we left to find Hali.

We found him in High Command. He was an admiral now. He put aside an important meeting to see us right away.

"Of course," he said. "I always knew it would come to this." He said it simply, without emotion.

"Um," Quilah said. "If you did, why didn't you warn me?"

"Would it have changed your mind?" Hali said.

Quilah slowly shook his head. "Probably not."

"Right," Hali said. "I now make decisions for many millions of Murines. I would never presume to make yours for you also. You have always been wiser than any of us, Quilah."

I realized right then. Hali was probably smarter than any human I knew.

"What will you do?" Quilah asked. "We're growing apart. All of us."

Hali let his head tilt an inch toward the floor. "I know."

"None of us ever really wanted that," Quilah said.

"Also inevitable," Hali said, looking up at Quilah again. "We had to grow up. To get our dream of belonging, we had to. And here it is. Cowboy his way, Lily hers, me mine, and you yours. Yours is the most unique. And, to answer your question, I will support you, Quilah, but from the subtle games of government and command. I can't openly support something that is going to challenge the way we have evolved into — the status quo."

"But if we don't," Quilah said, "None of us are going to make it."

"That might be," Hali said. "Or not. We don't know. Thanks to the Beholden, we are on a fast track to change even now. It remains to be seen where that track ends. The war's outcome, our future, all of it. The possibilities of just the new quantum jump drive they gave us... We've only explored one hundredth of it. Everything is in question now. Nothing will ever be the same."

I actually felt a pang of guilt. Hey, mice. It was that or die. Yeah, that's my excuse.

"The world is changing," Quilah said. "Our technology is changing. But Murines have to change their beliefs."



Their feelings. Or none of it matters.”

“Why?” Hali asked. A genuine question of curiosity, I felt from him. He wasn’t arguing.

“In the very end, all we have is each other,” Quilah said. “All of life. It’s about connection. And that’s all that matters.”

“In the end?” Hali said. “You mean, at our deaths?”

“After that,” Quilah said.

I felt a pang of something uncomfortable hit my stomach.

Hali’s eyes got wide now for the first time. “Do you actually mean to tell me you’re becoming... There’s no word for it in our language...”

“Spiritual,” Quilah said. “Religious. That’s what the Beholden call it. But I call it evolved. And we have that word.” He shifted his tail to make a point. “We have to evolve, Hali. Something shifted the Atrax in a horrible direction. We have to go the other way.”

I looked nervously over at Avaril.

Hali was quiet. I felt his brain and mind cranking up to full speed. It was an extremely impressive mind, for a non-Vasserian.

“What we have to do is survive,” Hali said. “That’s paramount. It comes first. You know Murines don’t believe in an afterlife, Quilah. Whatever the Beholden say, they might not be right all the time. Life, while it lasts, takes precedence.”

“I halfway agree,” Quilah said. “But it’s time to consider the rest. We never have. It’s time. It’s the only way out of this mess. Not guns. Not to meet destruction with destruction. That will never work. In the end.”

Hali shifted his seat to face us. He was into it now.

“Quilah, the Atrax aren’t after our food. Or resources. Or metals, or technology. They want to eradicate us for the sake of hate, as far as I can tell, and I *am* the leading expert on our planet right now regarding them. With what your... friends have given me, I have ten times more knowledge than anyone at the moment. There’s something wrong with these creatures. They can’t be called Murines anymore. I’ve seen them, Quilah. They’re... toxic. Insane. Bent, twisted, deformed versions of what we used to be. Mentally and physically. They retain our speed of production, and our single-minded focus on advancement, but they have dedicated it *all* to a warlike world. Your Beholden think we have some poor ways, like ending our wounded, but the Atrax make us look like... Like our gentle mother.” He regretted saying it right away. He and Quilah both looked down. Hali looked up again first. “They absolutely have got to go, brother. They won’t stop until we are all gone. Every last one of us. For no other reason than we exist.”

“*That sounds Zorian,*” Avaril sent to us. Khelben nodded grimly.

“My plate is full with this crisis,” Hali continued. “It’s much worse than anyone knows. Their fleet keeps growing, like an out-of-control mold with no limit on its food. While we are barely struggling to keep up — even with all the new technology. They manage to copy it in days, weeks at the most.”

My eyes flickered wide. Khelben looked at me. I felt his meaning without the need for telepathy. *Didn’t see that coming, did you? I tried to warn you.*

“Hali, friend, brother, I beg you,” Quilah said, approaching his sibling. “Please open your mind just a little bit wider. You’ll see there is no good end to this race. It ends with *all* of us gone. There won’t be a winner.” He put his nose on Hali. “You’re right. The Beholden don’t know everything. They’re just as lost as we are in many ways. This isn’t their idea. It’s mine. Mine alone.”

Hali put his nose back on Quilah. A mousey hug, I knew by now.

“I love you, Quilah,” he said. “But my path is chosen. I can’t turn back now.”

“Cowboy said the same thing,” Quilah almost sobbed.

“I’m afraid it’s just the way things are. We don’t have the power of the Beholden. And they refuse to directly

intervene. We are left to our best choices, which we must make as a species.” He got up and went over to another table of notes, charts, and computers far more advanced than they were last week. “I will support you as much as I am able. I hope you can do this. But changing the mind of an entire race, especially one only half-evolved, as we are, who still react to instinct and fear, will be almost impossible.”

“I have to try,” Quilah said.

“I’m behind you,” Hali said. “I won’t let anything happen to you if I can prevent it. But of course, you have... gods on your side.” He smiled at using the word.

Pathetic, inexperienced gods. Well, most of us. More like new, bumbling superheroes.

“They aren’t gods,” Quilah said. He walked slowly to the door, head hanging low, deep in thought. At the door he turned around. “We all are, Hali. Every one of us. And all we have to do is wake up.”

We left the High Command.

Avaril held my hand. I was almost crying. I had no way in my heart to bring up the subject, and Quilah seemed so happy, so set on his path. Bringing spirituality and peace to the Murines was a good, noble thing. It was probably what would do the most good.

But how would I ever tell him that his race has no afterlife?

I just couldn’t ruin his holy quest. I couldn’t ruin his wonderful illusion. I just couldn’t do it.

And that sat in my gut like a cannonball.

Quilah walked through the city, out in the open, as fearless as you please. He used to slouch, to shrink, to hunch over and scurry — like a scared mouse — everywhere he went. Now we walked casually, relaxed. Certain we were going to protect him from anything and everything bad. Mice reacted in awe, knowing who he was, in shock, with disgust and contempt, and with hostility. They threw things at him, even lunged at him.

“Ah, dammit,” I said. “Here we go.”

I shielded him with TK, and everything bounced off. Even the mice. No time to be sneaky about it. It was possible Quilah even *wanted* me to do that.

Once they realized they couldn’t touch him, that some invisible force protected him, mice ran. Ran and told other mice. We were alone for a few hours. The streets cleared out before us. It was dramatic.

“Shouldn’t we... Like, get you training, or something?” I said.

“Training?” he asked. “For what? Being a prophet?” He sounded amused.

“Well, yeah,” I said.

Avaril laughed.

“Where are we going to get *that*?” Karen said.

“I don’t know, find some wise mouse on a mountain somewhere? Find some mousey literature on spirituality? There has to be *something*...”

Avaril laughed harder. She was almost tripping over her own feet.

“Come on, Jared,” Quilah said. “So I can learn to be wise? Levitate? Tell the future? Impress Murines?” He pretended to push me over and his hand passed through me. “None of that matters.”

“You’re almost scaring me, Quilah,” I said. “You grew up so fast. You seem completely different. Like you know exactly what to do.”

“I have an idea of what direction to go in,” he said. “It feels right. More right than anything I’ve ever done. And that’s enough for me. You work the same way, Jared. On feelings instead of thoughts. Heart not mind.” He grinned, his cheeks puffing out adorably. “Don’t worry, it’s still me.”

“There is no training for this,” Karen said. “No Yoda here.”

“We’re making this up as we go along, I guess,” I said. “Great.” I slapped my forehead. “What have I done.” Khelben nodded smarmily.

We finally saw some mice ahead. We were back in the slum Quilah had been born in. And there were some mice who could not get out of our way. There was a mother with a sick child. She had been defending it from attackers trying to end its life. She had bleeding wounds all over her. She was dying. The baby was almost as bad. The mob intent on killing them saw Quilah coming (by himself to their eyes) and vanished in a heartbeat.

“I’ll show you what you’ve done,” Quilah told me. He stopped in front of the mother mouse.

Even though her life was draining from her, she found the energy to tremble in fear. Quilah came softly to her.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. He touched her child. For some reason, she didn’t bite him. His eyes closed. He went immediately into his trance like the healing of the *Quick Tooth’s* crew had been only yesterday.

I know Khelben was staring hard, but he saw nothing. Neither did we. No energy, no molecules except those miraculously healing in that baby mouse. The child’s wounds vanished in a second and there wasn’t a trace of anything we could see that caused it. The mother stared as if she didn’t know what on Muscila she was looking at. She looked confused to the point of paralysis.

Then Quilah touched her, ever so lightly, on her head. Her bleeding stopped. Her color came back. Her breath went from ragged gasps to deep and effortless. Her eyes got no smaller. Quilah opened his eyes and smiled.

“It worked,” he said.

“Amazing,” Khelben said, mouth slightly open.

“You don’t have healers?” Avaril asked. “Back home? Somewhere?”

He was just staring at Quilah. “No. We don’t. It is a lost art. Since the dawn of time, no *knight* has ever been able to do it, except to manipulate matter with great skill. But this... this wasn’t... I don’t know what this was.”

“Kind,” Quilah said. He was looking at the mother still, with a gentle face. “This was kind.”

The mother sat there, clutching her child, her soul deciding how it was going to react. For a full minute. Finally, her eyes teared up.

“Thank you,” she whispered to Quilah.

I had never heard a thank you like that before. And the feeling. That feeling flooded over us all like a freight train. You know it. You know the feeling. You’ve done something selfless before, something for someone who desperately needed it, even if it was just giving a bum some money, or hugging someone who was starved for compassion. That wave of *good* that went through your heart, washing away all fear and sadness — making your soul glow with warmth. Making you want to do it again for someone else. That feeling. The very opposite of apathy. It’s called love.

It smote us but good. We all felt what Quilah was feeling, and it easily overwhelmed everything else in the whole world.

He had just done the best thing he had ever done in his life. It was his test. And now he was sure.

The mother licked his face, his hands, his feet.

“No, no,” Quilah said. “Don’t do that.” She stopped. “It’s okay. Tell others. The grove of Ulinther trees, ten miles in the direction to the colder of the Sun. I will be there. Tell others, if they have need, to come.”

The mother nodded her head. Then slunk off with her healthy child, wary of the world and its cruelty, sad to be leaving Quilah and his benignancy.

Quilah looked at me. Karen had fallen to her knees, hands over her face, weeping. Avaril’s Amber eyes were alit with tears, her face a mask of awe and profound feelings. Even Khelben was shaken.

I think that was the most beautiful feeling any of us had ever experienced. Any of us. Even the hundred-million-year-old knight.

We were speechless.

“Do you see?” Quilah said.

I nodded, dumbfounded. Yeah. *That* could stop a war. Enough of that could do... anything.

“Alright,” he said, and kept walking with a relaxed, confident stride.

We followed, looking a lot like disciples.

