

## CHAPTER 23

### *Awoken*

I woke to know that I was critically injured. It was hard to concentrate. My ears were ringing with the tone of the hammer hitting the crystal ship. I smelled acid and ashes.

Khelben was frozen in place, his one hand against the back of the Atraxian commander's head, having smashed it into the side of the ruined *Tooth of Earth*. The black crystals were gone, and the Atraxian commander was dead, his skull caved in just like Khelben's. They lay there together, stopped in time at the moment of both their deaths.

Karen was laying on her back, gasping for breath, still clinging to life, but growing weaker by the minute. She had her arms around Cowboy, who lay across her, lifeless. She was sobbing.

Avaril was propped up against the shattered base of the crystal ship, holding her crystal sword in one hand, holding her chest with the other, gazing upward. Blood flowed from her in a steady stream. She refused to die laying down, I guess. I had no idea how long I had been out.

Hali was dead, along with his guard.

The city was still being crushed underneath mountain-sized pieces of falling starships. They landed with repeated thunderous explosions. We could feel the impacts from where we stood miles away. It was like a giant was hammering the planet over and over.

And all the starships — every single one — were falling from the sky, because the pilots were all dead.

Every Atraxian in the solar system was dead.

As far as my eye could see lay enormous piles of dead Atraxian bodies. Dead Murines. Smashed technology. Fires. Smoke plumes that stood like columns rising up into space. Carnage and cataclysm. A few sparse Murines wandered the field of death stunned, frightened, and confused. Most were wounded. And the living were still ripping the wounded ones apart in most cases.

The planet had been brought to the precipice of being uninhabitable. And the society had been utterly destroyed. My powers were gone, the crystal ship still and quiet, emanating no energy whatsoever. So I couldn't see the entire planet, but I guessed that less than one percent of the Murines remained.

Was that a technical success? No. No, I decided our mission was a complete failure. We had botched it, but good.

And Quilah stood there, trembling, covered in our blood and the blood of his friends, looking around him in horror. He looked like the frightened little boy I had first seen again, but his hair was grayer, his eyes sad. The weight of the world was on him. His head hung down and his shoulders sagged because of it.

Quilah slowly shuffled over to Karen to try to heal her, but nothing happened. No trance, no healing, nothing. Quilah seemed upset, and after a minute of trying, began crying. His gift had departed from him as mysteriously as it had come. Perhaps it had been our ship all along. Maybe it had come from the living energy of all the life on the planet, now reduced to near zero. Maybe they had done their work and it was their time to end. We would never know.

Karen put her hand on his wet cheek and looked equally sad herself.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

Quilah looked puzzled.

"Poor Lily," Karen said.

Avaril's head came up with mine. Panic struck our faces.

"Oh, no!" Quilah moaned. "Ohhh, nooooo...!" He turned to look at me in desperation. I turned to look at Avaril. If any of us had one speck of power left, it was...

We were instantly tessered to Quilah's house.

Not one brick was standing. It had been too close to some attack or falling debris. It was now in pieces of shattered glass, ruined stone, and burnt wood. All covered in a thick layer of grey ash, still falling like snow.

Quilah found Lily. She was crawling on her belly, without the use of her legs, feeling all over the ground, for she was blind, and her nose full of blood. She was trying to collect her newborn babies to her. Twelve in all. Eight boys and four girls, born just an hour ago. None of them had lived.

Quilah held his mate in his arms, eyes wide. His first look at his new family, what he had always dreamed of, was this. His tears slowed on his face, mixing with ash, and made grey trails down his fur. He looked down at Lily with a breaking heart. He had no words. He couldn't speak.

Lily flopped herself over onto her back so she could see him, but she couldn't. Maybe she had been looking at the sky when the ships collided. Maybe she had been hit by a blast of superheated air. It didn't matter. Her back was broken and her intestines had burst from her stomach. She was dragging them along behind her as she tried to collect her dead children, hoping that she might find one of them alive, knowing she wouldn't.

Quilah, sobbing uncontrollably, was trying to heal her. He was putting everything he had into it. But of course, it had never required effort when it had been working. Finally, he was crying so softly that it brought tears to our eyes. Karen collapsed, feeling every moment of agony. Avaril sat down and the invincible war goddess finally wept uncontrollably, sword forgotten at her side.

Lily lifted her shaking hand to her lover's face. She stroked his cheek weakly.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Everything's okay."

Then she died.

Karen put her face against the ground. Avaril's last bit of will finally gave up, and she collapsed.

And I, for the love of my friend, turned my tear-streaked face to the sky and used up the very last drop of my will.

"Actura!!!" I screamed with my mind. "Actura!!! We need you!!! Vashtarr!! SOMEONE!!! HELP US!!!"

I repeated it over and over, but nothing happened. Vashtarr did not appear over the horizon to rescue us. No miracle came. *They've all been used up*, I thought.

When I looked back, Avaril had her hand over her mouth. Her eyes were wide open, staring. Karen was wearing a grimace so dismal I felt her shock without telepathy. They were both gazing aghast at the same thing. I thought nothing worse could possibly happen. But I was wrong.

Quilah was racked in a seizure. His back stiffened on him, and his eyes shut in pain. He convulsed once, fell over the body of Lily, and tried to get up. He made it halfway. Then another seizure took him. He spasmed violently, flopping aside several feet to land in a bent, awkward position. I rushed to his side and held him to my chest as he convulsed.

"No," I moaned. "No, no, no! Quilah, stay with me!" I looked at the sky. "Oh, God! Someone help him!"

But no help came. Karen crawled toward us. Avaril had to crawl as well.

Quilah stiffened and seized twice more, each one weaker than the last. He opened his glassy eyes. He reached out for me and found my face, as Lily had found his.

"I... I'm sorry," he told me. "I failed you. And our mission. I'm so, so sorry..."

He grew weaker and weaker, and finally went limp in my arms. I felt him breathe his last breath as The

Leavetaking took my dearest friend's life.

My glowing tears fell on his soft, still body.

The wind gently blew his fur and filled it with ashes.

I cried. I cried to the heavens. My heart broke into pieces. I barely felt Avaril's hand on me until it slipped off and fell to the ground against my side with the rest of her. She was finally gone. Her last act in life had been one of compassion — to try to comfort me.

Karen was laying on her side, panting, trying to stave off death.

I held Quilah in one arm and Avaril with the other and cried. I cried until there was nothing left. Then I just sat there, in the middle of the desolation, numb and lonely to my core. His body grew cold against my skin.

I don't know how much time passed. Minutes? Hours?

The lifeless city was silent but for the tender wind.

At long last, The eastern sky began to fill with light. The light slowly grew behind the dark grey clouds made of ashes and hopelessness.

I felt Karen touch my foot. It was all she could reach. She had to use all her strength to do it.

And I saw. I saw what she saw.

The world looked different with all the spirits in it. So many. Billions. Maybe trillions. Way too many for the lives lost recently. And as I watched, they faded into existence out of nowhere. Their numbers grew and grew. The sky, the ground, the ruins were full of them. Murine, and the smaller, dimmer Atraxians both, their spirits flooded into the city and delicately drifted toward us. Until the sky was full of glowing, soft lights against the rising dawn. It was sadly beautiful.

So here they were. All of them. All of the spirits who had died, perhaps since we arrived. Or perhaps ever. All coming here. And not fading. None of them vanishing. As if they were waiting. But waiting for what?

"*For whom,*" Karen sent.

The first ray of sunlight made it through the dense clouds, and struck across us. Our world was lit in gold and amber. I looked into the sun as the clouds parted, as if told to do so by a higher power. Karen's grip on my foot tightened.

I looked back.

From Quilah's body, his spirit rose. But it wasn't a candle flame, or a wispy point of light. It was *him*. Golden white, glowing in light, it was Quilah himself as he had appeared in the trance world. As he had looked as a little boy. His eyes were shining like the sun that lit him, his face was as radiant as the most beautiful morning I had ever seen.

He turned toward me slowly, saw me, and smiled sweetly. I saw full recognition in his eyes. He knew me. He knew who he was. I burst into fresh tears, blubbering and spitting on myself in the process. I couldn't look away. He was so, so beautiful!

Then a brilliant, dazzling light rose out of Lily's body, followed by twelve bright flames from each of his children, and they danced around Quilah's head like a crown.

Like a psycho prism.

I felt everything in that smile he gave me. All his love. All his peace. And all of his fully formed soul.

I understood. I couldn't stop crying, but now they were tears of joy. Quilah was the one. The very first soul to evolve of his race. He had made it.

And, true to Actura's word, he had gathered all the others.







He rose up, slowly, never taking his eyes off me. He drifted into the sky as all the other lights — billions and billions — gathered around him like an eternal cloak. When they were all upon him, he raised his hand to me in the Alpha Knight gesture, which looked so similar to a human goodbye. Then he turned, and led his people into the sun.

And was gone.

Karen sobbed until she passed away. But I think she passed on happy. Almost laughing.

I was the last one left.

I looked into the sun and felt him there. On every ray of light. In every bit of warmth.

“Oh, God... my dear friend...” I cried. “I love you so.”

And I knew, without doubt, that he loved me too.

His soul had ascended. He would live forever. And because of him, the rest would follow.

Had that, after all, been our mission all along?

It was my last thought before waking up.

