

## CHAPTER 15

### *Shunned No More*

They came. At first, just from the city. Then from nearby cities. Then from nearby continents. And finally, from the moons and starbases.

Quilah healed them all. Every one of them. The only things he could not cure was death, though he tried.

The oak grove turned into a home base that we built up more and more. Our matter manipulation was growing as fast as all our other skills, and we were able to create a massive fortress a large city block wide and long before Quilah told us to take it down. It was pushing the Murines back, he said. They needed to be welcome, to have access to him. We took it down and kept our vigilant attention on him at all times.

He spent every waking moment among the people. Eyes closed, face relaxed, in perfect bliss. We couldn't go near him without feeling it. We would become lost in it. It was so powerful we couldn't focus through it. Khelben decided that was detrimental to his ability to use his powers, and he departed for the asteroid belt again, leaving the matter in our hands. We floated in the air around Quilah while he worked, our keen eyes and all senses reading everything going on all around him at once. Down to the molecules. Everything. We could react in under a millionth of a second. We memorized the patterns of every single molecule in the field for a square mile. Nothing happened within that space that we didn't know about. We could tesser, and matter manipulate metric tons at will, shift frequencies, use frightening amounts of TK with fine control as if we had a million hands, and know the feelings and thoughts of every living being there.

We were Alpha Knights at last. And still learning. Still growing.

But all that power paled in comparison to what was flowing through Quilah. We could not understand it.

He began to glow while doing his work. I don't mean glow just to our special eyes, or some kind of invisible energy. He glowed to everyone. All the Murines saw it. At night, it was bright enough to be seen a mile away. The soft golden-white light around his whole body made his white fur seem iridescent, and intensified around his head and hands. The glow stayed on others a short while after he touched them. It was the most welcoming, lovely light we had ever seen. Like a gentle version of the sun on a perfect day.

Within a week, he had thousands coming to him every day. Some of them were even being chased by those who would do them in for being sick or hurt. From miles away, their attackers would encounter invisible resistance. They would trip, smell something horrible, or just plain hit an unseeable wall (that one was mine). The victims, if they could make it close enough, would make it all the way.

And there were those who eventually tried to kill Quilah. Many times. But bullets, knives, teeth, and even beam weapons were too slow for our thoughts. We could see faster than the speed of light. And react much faster still. Nothing touched him. And, of course, in a humorous and unenlightened way, unfortunate things happened to his attackers, whom he went out of his way to heal every time. He finally informed us (me) that it was pointless to punish them. It only taught them that being hurt felt bad, and they knew that already.

While he worked, and when he meditated alone, he would hum and sing strange mantras, in some weird language, or no language at all, none that we could understand anyhow. It couldn't be translated into Vasserian. It wasn't words that anyone knew. They sounded like words, these mantra-chants. They sounded like musical,

flowing, repeating phrases. But when he woke up, Quilah didn't remember doing it. They had power to them, these chants. When he did it, we all felt energy coursing through us. Every living thing did. The Murines, the bees, birds, and squirrels — even the plants would grow faster. The plants around his hut, where he did his meditations, were five times taller than all the others, and had bright, vivid colors. Murines around him would heal slowly, even without his touch. Any living thing around him was filled to the brim and overflowing with energy. It was as if his sounds were calling all the life-force of the planet into one place.

What he did remember was talking. He told everyone to treat each other with love and kindness. To forgive all things. To let go of pain and fear and hate. Sound familiar? It's all there. And he had never read one holy text from Earth. Not one, and he said it all. He repeated every word of Buddha, Krishna, Christ, even the holy men of the Native Americans. I had heard it from my father and studied it in college, but Quilah had never heard it from me. He just said it. Like the words were his own, and afterwards, admitted they weren't. He just knew what he had to say. He confessed he didn't have to think them up. They just came to him.

The crowd listened to the words he spoke with that perfectly still, spooky mouse attention. A massive population gathered every morning and evening to hear him speak. He would sometimes speak for hours. Other times, a single word. Every time, the crowd was overwhelmed by feelings of peace and perfectness, so much that they would often go into community trances, in which they would *all* begin to chant like Quilah, in the same voice, with the same words. It could be heard for fifty miles. When *that* happened, the hills and plants actually glowed with shimmering energy. You could feel it in the ground, coming up through your feet. It was a massive, coruscating feeling of peace blazing outward from the communal chants, going all the way into the city and beyond. Miracle healings were reported hundreds of miles away from Quilah and his camp.

We petty Alpha Knights watched all of this with eyes just as wide as they could go, never blinking, forever in wonder and profound respect. There just were no words with which to talk to each other about it. It went past that. We felt it. There was no need for discussion. It was true power. All we had was energy.

Eventually, Quilah took his show on the road. He told me it was time to become the wandering prophet, messiah, whatever. He wanted to take his healing to the rest of the world. We obliged him. Quilah learned to fly. With TK help, of course.

He loved it. We taught him how to turn and spin in the air, how to catch drafts and dive like a hawk. I flew with him everywhere we went, and he was always like a little kid being lifted around by his parents at playtime. He laughed and smiled and let out noises of pure joy. Every chance we got, we spent in the clouds. When it was time for him to move on, leaving thousands of healed, grateful believers behind, he would simply rise up into the air slowly, and then streak off into the heavens. Thousands of Murines watched him fly, vanish, walk on water (that was my doing, I'll admit, and Karen and Avaril thought it was hilarious), create food out of nowhere, and build camps for the poor, even summoning fresh water out of the ground. All of it was us Knights, of course, except for the most important part. The healing and his unshakable faith were all his.

Quilah walked the earth, needing nothing except his guardian angels on his pilgrimage, healing, building, giving, and teaching. He even visited the moons. His legend grew and grew, for mice are such gossipers. He would show up with nothing, build cities, heal anyone who asked, give them messages of hope and peace, and then vanish without a trace, to appear in another place, often thousands of miles away, the next moment. While some of it was explainable by technology, the Murines had no transporters. No methods of fast healing. No personal levitation devices.

He spent a few months doing all this, and by the time he returned, all of Muscila had heard his name. Some still hated him for being Shunned, and many feared him for the things he was able to do, but many also revered, respected, and loved him. He was humble in the midst of it all. He called it his work. All he wanted to do was give, and that was all he did.

While all this grew past our wildest dreams (and nightmares), let me catch you up on the rest of what was

going on.

In the time that passed, Hali was promoted to Chief Director of High Command. That was it. He was at the top. He would have been the equivalent of a four-star general. He still had others over him technically, but they listened when he spoke. They listened because he was never wrong.

Back at the grove, food and supplies in mass showed up at the grove (and the gigantic surrounding encampment), providing everything the Murines needed to stay there. It became a city unto itself to rival even Dathriim. The mice dug burrows and miraculously, houses grew out of nowhere — made of stone and earth, trees and plants, even metals to house them. More and more each day. We could do a house in several seconds. But so many mice showed up each day that we were always behind on what we called “construction duty,” most of us being on tour with Quilah. So Hali sent help, creating more jobs, and turned the grove into a proper city. The entire thing was functional within a month, with a war going on no less. Food and supplies were becoming hard to come by. Hali *had* to be taking a lot of heat for this. But maybe it was small enough (or weird enough) yet to be below the radar. When Karen listened in on High Command and the government of Muscila, no one really believed the rumors. It was just like Earth. Humans back home might see flying saucers landing on New York City, but to most people it would just seem like more CGI magic. The cure for cancer, aliens, dragons, and magic — all of it could be real, but the world didn’t have minds open enough to see it. They were in hard denial. They refused to see it happening right under their noses.

Yet. Quilah was trying his best to change that. He was coming into his own. My boy had grown up.

My boy. Yeah. I guess I saw him like that.

Strangely, the “TV” stations did not cover the Quilah phenomenon. Instead, they covered other events.

That’s how we found out about the nation’s first battleship. The battleship *Bright* had been under construction for months (a really, really long time for these mice) and it was their pride and joy. It was to be the flagship of the Murine fleet. Possessing every new technology and then some they came up with on their own, it was an impressive vessel. It came in at 250,000 tons — almost dreadnought class. It had the new armor that could take a direct hit from a heavy missile and not even need to be repaired. It had over 2,500 turrets, each with triple guns — the latest beam weapons. It carried 120 brand new, agile-as-hell fighter craft and was accompanied by a fleet of carriers, heavy cruisers, destroyers, and missile ships. It had extreme-long-range scanners, nuclear dampers, battlescreens, and triple back-up systems. It had a power plant capable of generating ten-times enough energy to power the largest city on Muscila. And it had the new Q-jump drives. It could make it to Atrax in a single day, instead of twelve jumps and two weeks. It was fast, massive, and deadly. And it looked astoundingly cool. Turned out Hali had pushed with all his considerable influence to make it the first Murine navy vessel made of white metal.

And... we laughed because we found out watching the TV... guess who the new skipper was?

Newly promoted Admiral Cowboy, commander of the finest Murine fleet ever built.

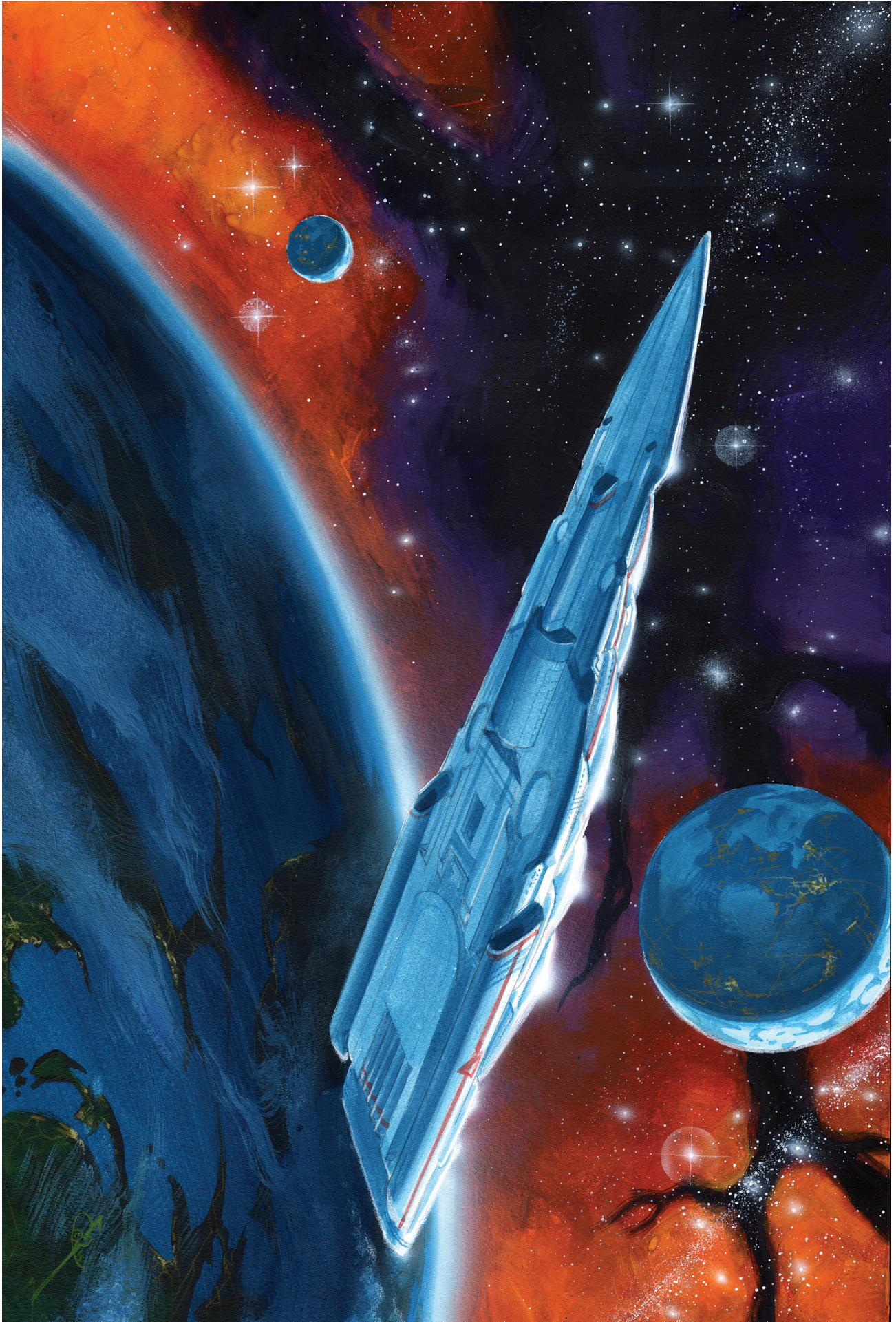
There he was, on the big screen, smiling that ear-to-ear grin like a kid again, accepting his commission. Good for you, big guy. You earned it.

Hali had known all along, of course. Hence his shit-eating grin every time Cowboy bitched and moaned “Where’s my command?!”

They had to make Cowboy wait until his fine ship was finished. They had been grooming him for the job the entire time, and boy had that driven him batshit crazy, heh heh heh.

Funny the way that we found out. Our focus was so much on Quilah we had forgotten the rest of the world.

The Atraxians were pushing their offensive. They crept closer and closer to Muscila, and smaller, fast ships had begun to make bombing runs on the Murine planet itself. So far nothing had been hit badly. The moons had taken hits, and the defense satellites even downed an Atraxian destroyer there. The enemy kept sending them. They were scouting runs, we knew that. They were sending their data back, just like we were. Biding their time,



planning their strategy. They were learning our technology and improving on it as fast as we could. Khelben kept up the race, against his wishes, claiming that if we were going to take a certain road, best to commit to it with a whole heart. He kept up his end. He countered the Atraxians step-for-step on the race up the ladder of technology, keeping it as slow as he could. But the civilization of the Murines had lost its sense of safety. Everyone knew now the war was closing in. The planet was beginning to echo Earth. They had pollution now. They were having a hard time finding places to put their trash and waste. There wasn't enough food for everyone, even with Quilah's "miracles." Not all the water was clean anymore. We couldn't be everywhere at once. And, just like Earth, we all just kept on going.

The Murines themselves were working on hundreds of inventions just *based* on what we had given them. They branched off so many different ways it became apparent we had misjudged their creativity. They turned battlescreens into home temperature regulators. They made use of new meson technology to dig underground at alarming rates, creating entire cities a mile beneath the surface. After learning of nuclear bombs, it made sense. They turned hull armor into flexible personal, powered armor for soldiers. One day, they were going to meet the Atrax face-to-face, and from what I'd heard, they'd need armor.

Our fleet was now over 400 ships and growing, led by the flagship *Bright*. Rumor was they were even working on a series of super-carriers and a dreadnought of 500,000 tons. That ship wouldn't be ready for another two to four months, which was forever in mouse terms. Meanwhile, an eager Admiral Cowboy led the battleship *Bright* off into space, to do war with the enemy and hold the line to keep their world safe. For awhile, the scouting runs stopped. No bombs fell on Murine soil. The battleship *Bright* and her heroic crew, including Lieutenant Commanders Yalli and Murismie, went forth and kicked legendary amounts of Atraxian ass. Their first victory was against an Atraxian carrier group supported by four battleships, and they came home without a scratch. That was followed by more of the same. They racked up kills and victories over and over, and without our help. Cowboy's natural talent, passion, hard-earned skills, and fanatically devoted crew made him the greatest military leader the Murines had ever known. They became known as the Indomitable Fleet, and Cowboy's new handle was Admiral Indomitable.

Be careful with titles like that, guys. Someone pissed off God when they claimed the Titanic was beyond his reach.

At home, the economy was booming. Every mouse had a job. The number of ships in the sky had increased ten-fold. New starbases were being built at every planet in the system. Massive quasar cannons were being mounted on every solid piece of land available. Even the asteroid belt was being mined and turned into armed lookout stations. We wondered if Khelben could phase the entire ship from being discovered. We were certain he had it covered.

With the help of Hali and the admiral, Quilah petitioned the government to do away with the title of Shunned. In such a desperate time, no Murine could go ignored. Every able body was needed. At least that's the argument Hali provided. Quilah had a good slice of of popular support, despite the majority still hating him. The proposition passed, barely, and was made law. No Murine was any longer an outcast. Legally anyway. In practice, old habit and fears die hard. But the first step had been won.

Quilah and his camp celebrated that for days, and at the end of it all, after months of hard work, he married Lily. We were all there at the ceremony, even Khelben. Tears filled our eyes. Quilah was so happy. And Lily, well, she looked even happier than normal. Her face just glowed. She knew very well that she was living her fondest dream. They were pronounced mates, and literally ran off back to their house. We all looked at each other nervously, chuckling at what was next.

"I'll go," Karen said, and left the ground to soar above the newlyweds and protect them, even in such sacred moments. Khelben went with her. Surely he had seen just about everything, and didn't care. They wouldn't need to be inside the house. They'd know everything that was going on for miles around. Quilah and Lily could enjoy

their hard-earned prosperity with peace of mind, protected by their faithful guardian angels.

Minus two.

Back at the celebration, Avaril and I decided to see how much alcohol (yes, the mice had alcohol) a Vasserian could ingest. She pointed out we hadn't had a break since we began this crazy journey.

Well, as it turned out, Vasserians were immune to toxins.

Unless they didn't *want to be*. Once we figured that out, we got well hammered. It was irresponsible, and reckless, and all kinds of other stuff. We didn't care. We placed a massive shield around the encampment so nothing bad happened, and flew to the top of a nearby mountain under the full moons. We lay in the grass on the side of the peak and looked down at the camp, a large as the city beyond it. We could see the starports both high and low, the moon bases, and every object in orbit, missing none. We held our control of our camp shield easily at a distance of forty miles. Power flowed through our willingly inebriated bodies.

We lay there, happy and content, fairly certain that our mission was almost over, that we would be going... home. Whatever that meant.

I put a long piece of reed in my mouth like Tom Sawyer. My hand went back behind my head and I stretched out. I felt relaxed for the first time in years. I felt good. The air was soft and warm on my smoldering blue Vasserian skin. Avaril's bronzed body shone in the moonlight and nebula gases like it was dark metallic copper. Our eyes, surrounded by such bright colors, lit the night. We felt every millisecond of life around us. Our hearts were in tune with the heartbeat of the world, and each other. Everything felt so perfect. So right. I had a brief epiphany that everything *was* perfect. Just as it was supposed to be. And it always had been.

I was so content that when Avaril leaned over me and put her warm hand on my chest, it seemed perfectly natural. Her brilliant eyes met mine. My heart sped up.

We stayed like that, looking into each other's souls for several minutes. For once, even for us, time stopped.

Finally, she leaned forward and her lips met mine. I felt the doors to her soul opening before me, like the castle of the grail to Percival on his holy quest. When he least expected it.

Our mouths connected. We tasted each other, felt our teeth, breathed into each other's lungs. We felt every fraction of the moment. Our energies leapt for each other, eager to finally be free and claiming what they had so restlessly desired. Our eyes closed, but our feelings opened. Mine, and hers, human souls in Vasserian hearts. We felt our spirits connect first. It was like a magnificent current of connection — it made our bodies jump as if your perfect lover had come up behind you and run their fingers slowly up your spine. She twisted and pulled me close. I gasped out loud and put my hands in her hair, continuing our deep kiss. Our faces filled with ecstasy — almost an unbearable agony. Our spirits commanded our souls, and they stepped willingly into each other. I knew her mind, her feelings, her entire experience. Our human selves were in shock, almost wanting to bolt and run. It was so intimate, so overwhelming, our bodies took the next step all on their own. Our clothes vanished to parts unknown, tattered away with a fleeting thought, and we joined completely. The merging of our entire beings sent us soaring into passion that consumed us whole. Our minds stopped. Our feelings stopped. Our spirits sang, and the universe heard us, singing back with billions of voices. Our eyes became the same color — a mix of amber and orange — and glowed like stars. Energy coursed through us, out of us, back into us, and spilled out all over the mountainside, filling everything for miles with love and our spirits with fire. Plants bloomed, snow melted, the wind matched our rhythm perfectly, slowly increasing in intensity. Clouds glided over the upper stratosphere, shifting and churning in time with our hips. Our flesh, now one, was alight with auroras of colors that never existed on Earth. Our spirits became visible and danced over us in a massive, twisting pyre, spiraling up into the stars, reaching for eternity. And finding it.

In one perfect, timeless climax, we both knew... everything. Ourselves, each other, the universe, all of reality. Every. Single. Thing. We both cried out without restraint, and our echoes ran freely over the night landscape for one hundred miles. The ripples of our ecstasy burst out in every direction like a nuclear blast. We forgot who

were were. We knew complete bliss.

For one moment. Together, in the holy confirmation of our desire, we, for one second, were one being — and that being was eternal.

And then it was gone.

We lay there, panting, as the literal afterglow of it bathed the entire mountain, ran down its face, and flowed across the plains, washing like a spectral, golden fog over the camp and the city. The clouds above us formed expanding rings, one on top of another, rising forever into space. Every living thing thanked us for the gift of so much energy. That spot, had it lasted, would have been a power spot to rival all others on that planet for millennia to come.

Our kiss finally ended.

Long after our eyes opened, I was finally able to break her gaze.

I felt like myself again. But I felt so much more alone.

We stayed like that, in each others arms, the auroral lights cascading from us in ripples, filling everything, rising, sinking, expanding, flowing over the mountains, down into the valley and hills. Our psycho-prisms had risen. I could read hers. She read mine. I read my name in hers and she in mine. They told our story. We understood it all.

The grass was gone from under us. The dirt under our bodies had been fused to glass. A perfect circle around us for twenty feet was one smooth, marbled gemstone surface. Glittering smoke rose from it and into the cool night air. The leaves and flowers facing us in every direction were bright and in full color, as if during a warm spring day. The grass around our circle was a deep, lush green, fading slowly over miles into its normal, dull winter color. And then finally, much further down the mountainside, snow. We looked around. The entire mountain was as naked as we were. All the snow had melted and turned into the phantasmal clouds above us.

Everything was perfectly quiet. We were aware of the camp below looking up at us. The satellites looking down at us. The city wondering what newly born star had chosen to appear on the mountain range on the horizon. We knew we had shattered Khelben's spell. He probably knew it, too. We didn't care.

I was about to ruin it by speaking, when Avaril, bless her, held her bronze finger over my sapphire lips. She kissed me again, softly, holding my head in her hands this time. Our eyes met. I wasn't alone after all. It happened that completion was that nearby.

Ever so slowly, like saying goodbye to a dear, best friend one grew up with who was departing on a long journey, our souls released each other. Our spirits finally unraveled. My eyes were dripping with gently glowing luminescence. She stroked my cheek. Her tears fell into mine.

She smiled. The most vulnerable, open, beautiful smile I would ever see in my life.

*"Do you remember what I came here for?"* she sent to me alone.

*"Something more,"* I recited.

She got up and reached down for my hand. She pulled me to my feet effortlessly. I wanted to talk. It was my defense against being self-conscious, I knew then. There was no need for it. She had shown me a better way. This was my wish come true.

We walked down the mountainside in perfect silence, hand-in-hand, naked, our halos burning over our heads, our prismatic auras trailing with us like smoke rising from our shining bodies. We walked down together, and on into the rising dawn.

