

## CHAPTER 21

### *The Murine Apocalypse*

We rescued Quilah from Cowboy's wrath. Boy, the admiral was pissed, but he had more dire things to attend to. He said the flagship of the Atraxian fleet, the *Dark Star*, was giving him an equal battle. The fleet admiral of that black dreadnought was far from a soulless robot. He had a mind to match Cowboy's, and he was doing it at every turn. Cowboy had his hands full outmaneuvering the Atraxian version of himself. He had finally met an equal, and the fight was on. He told us to keep a lid on the prophet of peace. He spat the term like an insult.

Khelben restored the blue screen to life, giving the *Bright* a lifespan ten times longer. From minutes to hours.

We dragged Quilah out of there and took him to High Command while Cowboy fought tooth and nail above to buy us time. As hours went by, more of our ships came out of jump to aid us, and always caught the Atraxians unawares, but it wasn't enough to turn the tides. It merely allowed us to hold our own, and the flow of our ships from Atrax would run out soon.

Karen was doing slightly better, and was eating the floor. She stayed on the *Bright* to give it a fighting chance against such heinous odds. As long as the flagship survived, our side wasn't beaten. Logical excuse, but we knew she liked Cowboy and didn't want to see him go down in flames. With Khelben's telepathic aid, it was she who got the blue screen back up and kept it going.

"I'll do it," Quilah said, when we had just begun to tell him our plan.

I was about to tell him the whole thing when Avaril poked me.

I poked her back this time.

"*I can't*," I sent. "*I can't do that to him*."

"*You have to*," she sent. "*You have to, Jared*."

I shook my head violently.

"No, sure I will," Quilah said. "A crystal that vibrates life. If we get that charged up enough, and we get enough people chanting in meditation, the entire planet will be covered in peace. Vibrations of peace. It could cure the Atrax. They don't have many more crystals. They might just stop. They might wake up from their long nightmare. The fighting would just *stop*." He smiled. "Get me a camera. I'll broadcast it."

"*Cowboy will shit sideways*," Karen sent, listening to us.

I was about to open my mouth.

"Sure," Hali said. "I'm on it, Quilah." He motioned to several of his high guard. They departed at a dead run.

I started to open my mouth again.

Avaril tessered me away. For real. She sent me a thousand miles west, to a small island out in the middle of the boiling ocean.

Like that would stop me.

I launched myself into the air at mach forty with TK, and rose up above the planet, heading back in a parabolic arc. On the horizon, distant shipwrecks stuck out of the planet like monstrous pieces of coral, still burning. The sky was layer after layer of scorched vapors, triggering lightnings and booming peals of thunder that echoed across hundreds of miles. Every second, thousands of beam weapons flashed in the blistered clouds.

Missile detonations rippled the air with shockwaves coming from everywhere. Impacts, crashing bursts, sounds of twisting, wrenching metal filled my ears. All I could smell was acid and ash. The mice had noses almost as good as mine. Their noses were much better than their eyes. Those who weren't shielded or wearing masks were all effectively blind. I felt the death everywhere. I felt the pain, the agony, the terror. I couldn't take it, and had to shut it off. Quilah was right. This was hell. And hell wasn't going to end until everyone was dead.

I decided in that brief flight that I would side with Quilah, no matter what. It simply felt like the right thing to do. My mind was confused, but my gut had never been. It wasn't going to be an easy choice to enforce, and nobody was going to accept it, but my heart was made up.

At the high arc of my return, I looked out to the battle and saw the *Bright* taking heavy fire from dozens of warships behind it. Its blue screen was flickering, trying to stay on at one hundred percent, but only managing seventy or so. Damage was getting through, and the armor was taking a heinous beating. I matter manipulated an especially powerful, fast missile for each of the attacking ships, and sent them rocketing toward their targets from behind. It was easy and fast. It only took a few seconds. Our powers, even drained, were still growing exponentially. That would have taken me days just days ago, even at full strength.

As I reentered the smoke-laden atmosphere, I sensed the impact of my efforts as the Atraxian warships went up in balls of fission. I smiled. *Got your back, Cowboy*, I thought.

I sundered the air downward, became a flaming meteor, and met the others at the site of Quilah City, where Avaril had tessered the wreckage of the *Tooth of Earth* onto Quilah's hill above the camp, still sticking out of the ground just as it had when it had hit the planet. Most of the city still stood. The starport was in ruins, but still struggling to function — launching and landing damaged ships, refueling, repairing like a racing pit crew, launching missiles and firing into space with quasar cannons. Back in the city proper, there were two kinds of Murines. Those fighting for their lives, firing and fighting with everything they had — some with their teeth alone — against the Atraxian landers and dropships. And those laying on their stomachs, heads up in meditation, zoned out and obeying Quilah's command to stop fighting. He had millions of followers. It was a tiny fraction of the population, but enough that the Atraxians were gaining the edge on the ground. Some of the Murine soldiers were even shooting their own people, calling them traitors. I could feel our fate balancing on the precipice.

The sun was just setting on a dark-crimson troubled horizon, turning all the colors around us into blood.

I slammed into the ground without grace and stepped out of the crater.

"Quilah, they're going to use the crystal to wipe out every Atraxian in the solar system!" I said as quickly as I could. As if it mattered to an Alpha Knight. Sound was like a dying snail on a sheet of ice.

Quilah was admiring the massive crystal.

"I know," he said.

Avaril stood there, arms folded.

I got a puzzled look on my face.

"Where's Khelben?" I said.

"Out collecting the fallen dark crystals," she said.

I turned back to Quilah.

"Dude," I said.

"Dude," he said back. "This will amplify everything good. With this, we can snuff out the fear and hostility. We can end this in peace. There will be no need to kill anybody. It will just stop!"

"Hali is making some... object right now," I told him, "To strike this ship and use the gathered energy to down every single..."

"I *know*, Jared," he told me patiently, like I was a child. "But it won't be needed. They'll see. You'll see. All we have to do is get enough energy going. Love. Forgiveness. Gratitude. Higher energy than hate or pain or fear.

Those energies are much stronger than the lower ones. The black crystals will lose their power. The Atraxians will be free of their spell. All of this will *just stop*.” He came up to me and put his nose against my chest. “You trust me, right?”

My heart softened.

“Yes, Quilah,” I told him. “I do.”

“Okay then,” he said. He crawled to the edge of the hill and addressed the crowd. His people. He told them they were going to enter a deep meditation to join everyone together, and begin chants. Though their eyes and faces showed fear, they clung to his every word, for Quilah showed no fear at all.

The moment they began, like old times, we felt the energy change. The ship responded immediately, and began to glow. The air cleared. The anxiety vanished. The chants filled the space. Within ten minutes it was as if we existed in a bubble of heaven, and outside it was hell with massive explosions, crashing ships, weapons vaporizing the air, and flames burning the ground. But here, in the heart of camp, in a slowly expanding radius, was a feeling of peace.

It felt surreal. It felt like a dream. I looked up and saw the furious battle raging as Cowboy chased his opponent around the moons and out into the other planets of the solar system, but it was as if I was watching a movie.

“*Can you feel this?*” I sent to Karen, millions of miles away.

“*Yes,*” she sent. “*It’s wonderful. It’s feeding me energy. I feel stronger.*”

Avaril and I made sure no ships’ weapons came within fifty miles of the camp. It wasn’t impossible. Power flooded into us from the crystal ship, cycling back on itself brighter with each chant, building perpetual momentum and gaining each minute. I felt my vigor returning.

An Atraxian destroyer came at us from orbit, already finished but still a falling kamikaze. I reached out and shoved it aside with the TK of a ten-mile-high giant. I sent it over the horizon like a child hurling a toy. Even I was shocked at my success.

Hali arrived in massive hoverships with the equipment. Cameras, portable broadcast stations, power supplies, and the most extensive sound equipment I’d ever seen. When he stepped off the ramps onto the grass of the camp, his face was a mask of awe.

“You won’t need the power supplies,” I said. And true enough, when his mice pressed the *on* buttons, everything powered up as if by magic. All the city lights fired up, and turned the underside of the giant smoke clouds into multicolored hues. The crystal was sending enough power out, on every level, to run it all.

And it was growing. As the chanting rose and the trances became deeper, the aura of the crystal became stronger. And wider. Even the wind was blowing away the acrid ash in the air that covered everything. Mice everywhere were stopping, growing calm, and relaxing into trances. They began chanting moments later, as if they had always known how.

“Now we have to give him his chance,” I yelled over the even tone of the steady chants.

Avaril nodded and kept her attention on the space above. We could read ten million things happening all at once. We knew every last minute detail of our space, which was rapidly expanding. We knew how many mice were chanting. We knew they were all in an altered state of deep meditation. We knew every blade of grass. Every piece of fallen debris. Every molecule on the air. We knew all of it, and could track it in real time. But the energy coming from the crystal we could not touch. It fed us our own power in abundance, and seemed not to lack for it — but that radiating love we could not control.

As hours went by, and we defended the camp, the enemy realized something was going on. The Atraxian flagship came for us several times, but Cowboy rode their tail, making it impossible for the *Dark Star* to reach us. They fired missiles. Avaril turned them back on their own hull. They fired the black beam at us, but it faded away as it got closer to the *Bright* amber glow of the Vasserian ship. Finally, seeing it wasn’t working, the Atraxian

commander changed tactics and sent his carriers down to attack in person. The first ships that landed touched ground and just stood there. The troops did not disembark, the guns did not fire. The Atraxians just stopped, as if someone had pulled the plug. They stood there and stared, their mouths slowly moving in a trance.

Holy shit. It was working. Even on the Atraxians.

But that was not to stop the *Dark Star*'s commander. He destroyed his own ships, his own men who fell under the influence of the crystal song.

The chants and the radius of its power increased anyway. Karen said she saw spirits coming from everywhere, even the Atraxians tiny lights, reaching for the crystal and its light. Every newly dead spirit, coming from every corner of the solar system — from ships and cities, from battlefields and the sea, to gather around the crystal. Or maybe around Quilah.

The *Dark Star*'s commander, just like Cowboy, would not relent, and so changed his tactics. His carriers had to land well outside the range of our radiating energy, which was out past seventy miles at that point. But land they did, and dropped ground troops, tanks, cannons and fighters to come in and put a stop to us. But on foot or on ship, they could not approach without falling under the spell of the crystal.

The cameras were up and rolling. This was all going out worldwide.

It had mixed effects. About ten percent of the world now had stopped and joined Quilah in his meditation, immediately being swept up and into the trance, adding to the crystal's power. About fifty percent went on fighting, including all the ships in orbit who had turned off their TV station monitors at the command of their fleet admiral. All others were divided, and it was causing division, even fighting among Murines everywhere. Civil war broke out at first. Cowboy and Hali's warning of dividing the race came back to mind. It looked like the plan was backfiring even while it was beginning to work.

Hali refused to join the trance, preferring to stay awake and alert. He went to his shuttle and pulled out a hard, locked case, about three feet on each side. He brought it over to us, and, knowing we could hear him and defend the city as well, he opened it with two keys — one around his neck, and one around the neck of his second in command. Inside the case was a large metal device the size of a human head and neck that looked halfway between a hammer and a tuning fork. It was a quickly put together thing, but looked heavy and solid. He picked it up effortlessly. It either weighed nothing, or had anti-gravity technology.

"This is our last resort," he said. "All I need is for you to modify its molecular structure to an exact measurement I will tell you. I assume you are a master chemist up to our levels at the least. Can you do that?"

A day before, I would have said no way. But now, I nodded my head. "But I won't," I told him. Avaril looked sideways at me. "I'm with Quilah," I told them. "I have to believe this will work."

"I respect your stand, Jared, but we need a backup plan. I'll do it," She told Hali.

So she took verbal commands of intricate chemistry and physics, translated it into reality, and created the hammer of genocide. It took on sleek angles. The metal changed into something Hali had factored up. It didn't have to change much, but its composition was no longer simple. It became almost as complex as the ship itself. Soon, one hit on the *Tooth of Earth* with that weapon, and this war was over. But I had to believe in Quilah.

Hali held onto the hammer, keeping it in reserve just in case. His mice surrounded him with weapons, and did not enter the trance.

The ship was glowing brightly with auroras of bright prisms.

Slowly, more of the population stopped what they were doing and gave in to the trance. More and more Atraxians just stopped and stood there like dumbfounded children listening to the first beautiful thing they'd ever heard.

They lobbed missiles, dropped bombs from orbit, and hurled massive projectiles at us from gauss guns. Nothing reached us, and their lines had to pull back. Farther and farther, lest they lose more troops to Quilah's calling and the song of the crystal ship.

More hours went by. Cowboy's fleet reached its limit. The ground troops finally gathered enough weaponry to reach us. Their sheer numbers were going beyond what we could control. So Avaril and I laid into them, destroying what they sent in, but they kept sending more. Ships dropped off more troops and more weapons. At this point they surrounded us with millions of troops and artillery, in a 250-mile radius. And while they were continuously backing away, they were just waiting for the moment when our song might stop and then they were going to swarm us with numbers. Going completely offensive, we resorted to using area-affect attacks, decimating tens of thousands of troops at once. We called massive lightnings down from the troubled sky. We directed storms at them. We smashed the ground with huge blows of TK. We crashed their own ships into them if the ships got close enough. But still they came. And still the radius of the crystal stretched outward, as more Murines went to sleep.

So the Atraxian commander changed tactics again, and began annihilating any areas of Murine soil where most of the population was in trance and unable to defend themselves. Millions more died without a fight. It was sheer butchery. We tried to defend them, fighting for all we were worth, turning all our power to destruction as fast and as efficiently as we could, but the dark commander had far too many ships, and too many missiles. He covered the entire planet. We were only two, trying to defend everyone while keeping our attention on Quilah and his camp. That commander was smart. Kill everyone feeding the crystal, and maybe it would stop.

And it seemed to be working. The radius of the crystal's power expansion began to slow.

*"Khelben could not find any of the crystals," Karen sent from the bridge of the Bright, now bleeding smoke from hundreds of wounds. "He has traced them to the Dark Star. The commander that Cowboy is fencing, has collected the fallen crystals aboard his ship. All eleven dreadnoughts are down, but the last one refuses to die. Khelben is going to go against it personally."*

Worldwide, more and more Murines joined Quilah's cause, even knowing they might be cut down in their sleep. The power of the crystal increased steadily again. More and more mice laid down their weapons and immediately fell into trance. The civil war was slowly dying out. It made no logical sense, but once touched by that energy, everything inside a living being wanted to give in to it. It was the only thing to do.

Hali made sure every frequency on every channel in the world broadcast it all at full power. The enemy tried to jam the signals, and they had more sheer radio power than us by far, but for some unexplainable reason, the signal only got stronger. Strong enough to reach through Atraxian defenses and resonate in the hulls of their metal ships.

Atraxian ships began slowing. The amount of explosions and beams in the sky began to decrease. We saw the bridge of the limping battleship *Bright* through Karen's eyes. One dark ship was not slowing at all.

The *Dark Star* sent twelve dark beams from its bow, arcing out to attack our ships, wiping out fleet ships from under Cowboy. But the beams were growing weaker. They didn't cut through ships in one blow anymore. It took several hits to do the job. And the black beams had to focus into a single, larger beam to do any damage to the battleship *Bright* through its blue screen, even flickering at forty percent now. Cowboy's weapons, on the other hand, were penetrating the black globe more and more often, doing more and more damage. The *Dark Star* was taking heavy damage, and Cowboy was more than happy to lay it on mercilessly.

Quilah's plan was working. As the numbers in trance grew, the fear became less, and the dark crystals lost power. They no longer had an entire race of hateful, charged maniacs backing them up. As more and more Murines joined Quilah worldwide, I began to see hope. Murines were joining faster than the black fleet could wipe them out.

We felt Khelben streaking upward into the heavens to do personal combat against the *Dark Star*. Behind him, Cowboy sent in half their remaining ships and all their fighters. Spearheading the attack, Khelben held nothing back, and split atoms at the cores of every ship that got in his way. They went up in nuclear fireballs as he shot past them toward his target. He held out his hands and fired quantum beams from them, smashing through



the black globe to cut into the *Dark Star*. The commander of the *Dark Star* turned the black beams on Khelben personally, and he dodged them at high speeds while Cowboy pounded the dreadnought from the other side. The tide was turning.

We held the city against millions of Atraxian ground troops, thousands of incoming shells, beam weapons that we could now bend away with TK alone, forcing spots of gravity to become so deep that it shielded us even from lasers.

All while Quilah's chants slowly converted the world to the cause. An end to fear and suffering. A new beginning.

Milliseconds of Alpha time became seconds of results. Seconds became minutes of tactics. Minutes became hours of grueling combat for anyone not in a trance. And as that number shrank, the Atraxians staying out of range were gaining advantage. They were overrunning the planet. Our range increase was slowing down as more and more Murines died. Even if it kept going, would there be anyone left?

Above us, Cowboy and his loyal-to-the-end fleet were fighting tooth and nail to the very last, running out of ammunition, energy, armor, ships, and lives. Now it was to the bones — it was an all-out, life-or-death fight, each side going well past their reserves into desperate action with terrible consequences. Half of the remaining Murine fleet became kamikaze suicides when they rammed Atraxian ships and detonated their antimatter drives on purpose. They did it one at a time, in sparse formation, to take out as many Atraxians as possible and not damage their own. Over and over, their faster ships charged the most powerful ships of Atrax and plowed into them, sometimes through them, and went up in a brilliant nova flash that took scores of enemy vessels with them into non-existence. It was a brave, final collaboration to save what might be left of their families. I had once heard of a mother mouse attacking a snake to save her children. I remembered the mother trying to wrestle me for her baby. These Murines were a noble, brave race. They deserved to live. But they were dying by the millions. This war was insanity. Everything was falling apart before our very eyes even as we crept slower and slower toward our only hope. I saw now that only Quilah's plan had any chance. And he had known it all along.

But the crystal was now losing power. We were using too much of it, and Murines were rapidly becoming an endangered species.

"Jared," Quilah said. Still fighting, hurling lightning and fire, TK and matter-manipulated weapons, I turned my head toward him. He was still asleep. His eyes closed, seated, perfectly relaxed with the world being destroyed around him.

"Quilah?" I said, confused.

"Jared, in order for this to work, *all* the fighting has to stop," he said, still deep under. "All of it. Most the world is with us, and more each minute. But *you* have to stop, Jared. All of it has to stop. Everyone. Every single one."

I felt panic. The range of the crystal was falling backward. Dear God, we were being swarmed. The Atraxians themselves were outside the city by less than a mile! Avaril and I were the only ones holding the ground, Karen the only thing holding the battleship *Bright* in one piece, and Khelben the only thing holding the enemy ships at bay, stopping them from reducing the planet to cinders. Fire and chaos detonated all around us and as far as even my eye could see.

If we stopped... We were *so* dead. Dead in seconds.

But I looked at his face. His beautiful, soft, serene face. He wasn't here anymore. He was somewhere better. I had a sudden, overwhelming urge to join him. The song entered my soul the moment I gave it my attention.

So, without another thought to stop me, I did. I sat down beside him, and put my hand on his knee. I closed my eyes.

"JARED!" Avaril screamed. Far away I heard her voice receding. "We can't hold without you!!"

And I was gone.

I woke up on the same hill, above the same grove, in a perfect world. It was sunny and calm. Not a sound except the bees, the birds, and the steady warm wind. The turquoise and emerald sky was at half an hour before sunset, and it had deep cobalt blues and indigo in it laced with fiery oranges, ruby reds, and vanilla yellows. The city wasn't there in the distance. No sign of technology or civilization could I see or sense. No sign of war, no smoke, no anything. Just the pure world as it had been since it was born. Pure, perfect, magnificent. The stars were just coming out, and they were tranquil, sparkling like tiny diamonds in a vast emptiness of quiescent space. The squirrel creatures played nearby, heedless of my presence.

Quilah was there, next to me, my hand still on his knee. His pearly white fur gently moving in the breeze.

He opened his bright ruby eyes. The eyes of a young, happy boy.

"Hello, Jared," he said, and smiled affectionately. How I loved that smile.

"Hi, buddy," I said. I felt completely at peace. There was a world, way back somewhere, where it was otherwise. I couldn't remember it very well. "You look young again," I said.

"And you look like yourself," he said.

I looked down. I was. I was my human self. Scruffy, unkempt, made of soft flesh instead of chiseled power. But it seemed right. It made me happy to be me for the first time in ages.

"This place is timeless," Quilah said.

Time. Time...

"Speaking of which, not to ruin the moment," I said.

"It's okay. You can't," he said.

"...But we're running out of it really quick on the other side," I finished.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

I paused. Here in this place, for some reason, there was no need whatsoever for secrets.

"Quilah," I said without nervousness or caution, "Your race doesn't have an afterlife."

"Not one that you understand," he said.

"And you do?" I asked.

"No, so that makes two of us. But just because you say it is so, doesn't mean that's true. It just means that Vasserians don't understand everything."

"Jeeze. Don't tell Khelben."

He laughed. "I know. Or you. I love you, but you're a bit of a control freak."

"Yeah. I know," I said. "But your spirits. The Atraxian spirits for that matter. They're just wispy lights. No thoughts, no memories, no personalities. And they fade away into nothing pretty quick. In minutes."

"And go where?" Quilah asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Exactly."

"We can feel feelings, buddy. We can read thoughts. We can feel soul energy. Your race isn't even close. When you go, it's over. That's it."

"Maybe," he said. "You might be right. In fact, I think you are."

I was shocked. I looked intently at him as he looked back at me in perfect stillness.

"You mean... You *know*?" I asked.

"I do," he said. "There are still infinite things we don't understand, but yes, it feels right. The spirits of my race are just energy so far. Not refined enough to hold who we are or what we've experienced. They don't remember who they are."

"Then you know that all the deaths going on, all the souls ending their journey here... They're just going to fade away. Yours included."

"I suppose so," he said.

I was perplexed into silence. He knew. He knew and he was still doing this.

"With no hope of eternal life, with no reward, nothing waiting for you at the end," I said, "You're still doing this? Why? Why not try to live as long as you can?"

He put his paw on my chest.

"This," he said.

I must have looked puzzled, like I felt.

"Jared, dear one, your heart is pure. All your immaturity, rebelliousness, and refusal to accept what is... It's all part of you, and you are you so very well. Your heart is your very strongest point. Karen has her spirit, and Avaril her body and mind, Khelben his will. You... You are brave to the end, willing to risk everything for love and dreams. Your heart is amazing. You lead with it, which others consider stupid, but you're not sorry. Your heart is your strength. I admire that so much about you. It's why we are so bonded."

"You're the same," I said, realizing it.

"Soulmates, across time and space," he said. "Meant to be family and best friends, no matter what." He nosed under my chin. It tickled. "We have always been together. And I think we always will."

"I can't bear to see you vanish from the universe," I told him, hugging him fiercely. I looked up into his eyes. "Quilah, I... You can have mine."

"Your what?" he said.

"You can have my soul. So you can go on."

His eyes glittered with tears. He pressed his cheek against mine.

"There is no greater love than that," he said. "But you keep yours. As if you could even give it away. I'm pretty sure Alpha Knights don't know how to do that." He looked out toward the sun, just touching the edge of forever. "Our souls have met. I feel that a part of you has always been me, and part of me will always be you."

I sniffed. How human. "Yeah," I wiped my eyes. "That feels right." I looked around the peaceful landscape. What would happen when our bodies were blasted into pieces? Would we stay here? Or vanish? Would I wake up?

"We came here to save your species," I said. "It looks like we blew it."

He smiled. "Not yet, Jared." He turned back toward me. His eyes were suddenly a bright sapphire blue. "Not yet."

There was a loud, jarring crash. It slammed me back into my body. I woke up on Muscila again, back in my Alpha Knight body.

"Well, that's it," Cowboy yelled with hoarse lungs through the klaxon of alarms and the acrid smoke. "She's broken for sure. Sound the abandon ship. Give me the helm."

But what remained of the bridge crew, soaked in blood and soot, refused to move. They just stared at him as if he had impugned them by suggesting such a thing. Karen stood by his side, weary to her bones, but still holding the ship together with TK while deflecting attacks, matter manipulating repairs, matter manipulating weapons fire, and channeling the energy from the *Tooth of Earth* below to keep her standing.

"Dammit," Cowboy yelled. "I'm going to finish that rat-ass bastard if it's the last thing I ever do. All of you, begone!"

They just stared. No one moved.

"With all due respect, Sir," Murismie said, blood flowing from his nose, "You would tell us... piss off."

"We're with you to the end, Sir," Yalli said. He was missing an ear and an eye, and one arm hung useless at his side.

Cowboy sighed, his shoulders slumped for the first time in a forty-eight-hour battle without rest. The *Bright* was finished. Its spine was fractured. Its armor was blown off. Several decks were exposed to space. Seventy



percent of its crew had been killed. Its engines were limping along on one-eighth impulse. The blue screen flickered erratically and then went dead for the final time. The hull was perforated with enough holes to look like swiss cheese. The power plant was only functioning because Karen was pouring energy into it from the crystal ship, and that was dwindling. The *Bright* took hit after hit like a boxer who could no longer hold his hands up. A merciless barrage of punishment relentlessly smashed the poor battleship closer and closer to Muscila. The enemy fleet still had hundreds of ships, even though the *Dark Star* was every bit as shattered as the *Bright*.

"Fine," Cowboy finally gave in. "Give me all the speed you can muster, Karen. Let's ram her and be done with this ridiculous charade."

Yalli grinned with a mouth missing all his teeth and slammed the grips forward. Murismie, missing his tail and bleeding to death from a mortal wound in his chest, routed all the power to the spinal mount for one last blow as they came in.

The crew cheered as they felt the ship lunge eagerly with all its remaining spirit into its last clash.

The screen came on. Cowboy didn't even know it still worked.

Smoke, black char, pipes, wires, beams of scalded metal. And then, a shape emerged from it all. Something that looked like a twisted rat mixed grotesquely with a crocodile and a hawk from hell. It had a uniform. Its eyes were black lights that were blinding to look at. It had black veins running through its translucent body like wires. And around its head, at angles that looked like rotating spikes, a crown of black crystals. Twelve dreadful black crystals.

It was terrible to behold. Cowboy's will held. Everyone else had to look away from the dread visage. Karen looked on, but her eyes began to bleed. The Atraxian commander, their King Admiral, had become something far more terrible. His crystal crown a dread Zorian psycho prism. His true nature was radiating forth like a weapon to crush the spirits of all who dared to witness it.

But Cowboy's spirit fought back.

"Admiral," Cowboy said. "We meet."

The thing nodded. "Aaaadmiirralll..." it hissed like a broken pipe.

"Prepare to meet your end, you wretched son of a bitch," Cowboy leaned in and bared his teeth at the monitor. He rattled his tail.

The thing laughed a horrid croaking, breaking noise that shattered its own bridge and shook the ground under Cowboy's feet. Then it gazed sideways and downward for a long, threatening moment. Then back up at Cowboy.

"Kiiiiiiihhhlllaahhhh..." it said.

And it tessered. Karen gasped out loud. The Atraxian bridge was empty except for dead bodies, killed by the damage to the ship, or drained by the crystals, no one could say.

Cowboy's eyes bugged out.

"I thought you said only Vasserians could do that!" he screamed.

"And... And Zorians!" Karen replied.

The screen switched views. The enemy ship was headed right for them as well. It was a head-on collision at full speed. And seconds away. Far too late to turn the massive battleship aside.

"Abandon—" Cowboy began, but Karen was ahead of him. With the speed of Alpha Knight thought, she folded space.

But she could only take Cowboy with her.

Far above, in high orbit, the two colossal giants careened into each other and went up in a massive quantum explosion brighter than the sun. The light swallowed the majority of both fleets.





*“The Last Charge of the Battleship Bright”*



“JARED!!!” Avaril screamed into my mind and ears.

I snapped awake in time to feel the light of the quantum detonation hit my skin.

Karen and Cowboy, both in terrible shape, appeared before us fifty yards away.

“It’s coming!” Karen yelled.

My Alpha Knight senses went into overload, and with my link to Karen I saw everything at once.

The crystal’s power was falling like a downed starship. Our own power with it.

I saw the world was ninety-eight percent under trance. Despite the population plummeting, despite the deaths and the horror, the chanting continued. Everywhere it continued, and gained souls. It was now happening independent of the crystal at all. It was happening on its own. It was growing by itself. It brought tears to my eyes.

The Atraxians were everywhere, in their mindless trance, mouths moving, trying to chant. Their armor was falling off, their weapons hung uselessly at their sides. They were in the city, they were in the camp. They were two hundred yards from us and shuffling like zombies to reach the center of the energy. Maybe they knew it was their only hope. I felt something run up my spine that felt like frozen mice.

Khelben had been caught in the quantum blast. He had been fighting his way to the bridge of the *Dark Star*. His link stopped cold.

Hali and his high guard were firing heavy weapons for all they were worth. They had gone through hundreds of power clips. They just couldn’t kill enough fast enough, even though the Atraxians were going down like the defenseless Murines had. Hali was partially right, of course. If they came out of the trance now, we would be overrun in seconds.

Quilah was still fast asleep. Worldwide his people were being killed while they sat there helpless. Cut down like grass. Killed by falling ships, stray missiles, smoke and fire, and by floods and storms. But not by Atraxians. Not any more.

A thousand yards away, in the mass of bodies and Atraxian heavy troops, stood the commander of the *Dark Star*. Dark-crystal halo blazing. Eyes like blinding black holes. Black lava was dripping out of its mouth.

And the Atraxians for one hundred feet around him, now exposed to the dark crystals at close range, snapped awake from the trance, and aimed weapons at us.

Karen’s power was almost gone. She began to limp toward us with Cowboy still in her arms, but stopped cold. She snapped her head toward the city. We all heard her.

“*Lily is giving birth.*”

Dear God.

The quantum explosion above us was going to burn the ground for five thousand miles into glass. It was too close. One hundred miles up was way, way too close. It was going to kill everyone. All of us, even the enemy, looked up at our burning doom.

“No — DONT!” Hali screamed over the earth-shaking roar of battle.

I stood over Quilah and raised both my arms. I called on the *Tooth of Earth* with all my will. Avaril and Karen extended their hands toward me, lending me what power they had. I summoned up all of my angst, my frustration, my rage, and my hate. Down to such desperation, I used everything I had. I used every ounce of pain I possessed as willpower. All the dark, horrible visions now attacking my mind from the twelve crystals around the *Dark Star* commander — I used them all. I turned them into sheer determination. I knew how to use this. I was used to using pain.

Fuck you, Commander.

The more it hurt, the more terrified I was, the more angry I got — the stronger my will became.

I reached up and pushed back against the quantum eruption, shielding the whole planet. And it worked.

I had to do that, you see. It was use all my power — all *our* power — or die for certain. I had to. Hali had seen

the trap in it, but we hadn't. Not in time.

The Atraxian commander had checkmated us. Every move. Even the collision of the ships. Checkmate.

While we were using all our power to save the planet, for one moment, he was free to move against us all.

At Zorian speed, with Zorian power.

And he did.

