

CHAPTER 10

A Force of Four

That was the real beginning of our time together, which in so short a span would seem like forever.

We wrapped Quilah in a brown mouse cloak so his fur wouldn't be immediately visible, and made our way into the streets of the city of Dathriim.

We pulled over (had to reign Cowboy in, literally, and when he tried to bite me I just let go the TK). We found an abandoned factory that was being renovated for resurrection and paused there.

"We have to conceal you all," I told Quilah. "Otherwise you'll never make it to the Naval Starport for enlisting."

"Yeah, I was wondering how we were gonna do that. But Cowboy just ran off..." he said.

"And you followed his lead, as always," I replied. I looked at Khelben and sent him my idea. He nodded.

I squatted down in front of the white mouse. He looked into me with his big, albino eyes. I felt some kind of slow, powerful energy passing between us. It was on such a high frequency that it should have moved too fast to be noticed, but there it was, and though I didn't know what it was, it felt good. I liked Quilah. And I knew he liked me. It was a deep, sure feeling.

"We're going to shift you over to our spectrum of things," I said. "Khelben is going to use his power on you. You're going to be invisible to the rest of your world, and we are going to be visible to you." I paused. "All of you."

When he relayed that, the others changed their stances. Hali turned to face where we were, curious. Lily smiled. Cowboy looked ready to pounce. He might. It was standard protocol on Muscila to challenge and accept challenges whenever given. Like fighting was in the old west. Usually nobody got hurt. It was their way of setting the record straight. They certainly didn't have an aversion to violence like Earth pretended to.

Khelben did it, and the mice saw us. Their eyes got big. Lily was hilarious. I think she stopped breathing for a moment, then realized it and sighed. Hali approached us to sniff us out at close range now that he could. Quilah even started, suggesting that maybe he had been seeing a ghostly or fuzzy version of us, but after seeing the real thing, he smiled.

Cowboy did indeed pounce. Right at me.

I had studied martial arts back home. I had been in great physical shape once, so I knew how to use the body I was in to some degree. I knew I was faster, stronger, and had more endurance by a mile. My mind worked at hyperspeed, and I saw him coming in slow motion.

And that little rat still took me.

He was all over me in a heartbeat, slow motion or no, my body couldn't move out of the way in time. Having 200 pounds of mouse all over you, determined to teach you a harsh lesson, was a new experience for sure. It reminded me of National Geographic documentaries watching an 800-pound lion taking down a deer.

He knocked me down and set his teeth on my backside. Not hard enough to seriously injure me, but oh my God, did that hurt! He latched on and held while I flopped around like someone had put electrodes on me.

"AHHHOOOGOD someone get it off!" I yelled.

Avaril burst into roaring laughter and went to her knees in tears. Karen was laughing, but cautiously moving toward me to do... something she hadn't decided on yet. Khelben even held back, grinning.

I could seriously hurt Cowboy if I wanted to, but he wasn't killing me. Just making me pay. I tried reaching behind me to get him off, but he was in the exact position to not be grabbed firmly. He knew how to fight.

"Okay, okay! Uncle! JeeEEZE!" I cried.

"Stupid Taker doesn't give me any more shit!" he said through his teeth.

"Yeah, fine! Let go!"

"Who's boss mouse?!" he yelled.

"Cowboy is boss mouse!" I answered.

Avaril's face was beet red. She couldn't breathe.

It wasn't until he had let go with an "I told you" face that I realized I could have tessered him off me. So much for human minds in Vasserian bodies.

"Now that we have *that* settled," I said, getting up and rubbing my sore ass, "Lead on to the recruiter, Boss Mouse."

Cowboy nodded his head firmly once, and went out into the night.

Mice were mostly awake at night. The entire culture was nocturnal by nature, but much of it had become adjusted to both times due to the war. The airbrushed sky lit up the night as we walked through the city and ended up at a huge line running into the starport.

The naval starport was a gigantic structure, several miles wide and probably one mile tall. It hosted a shipyard, launching platforms, and a host of other military functions. We waited in line for only a moment until Hali realized we didn't have to. We were invisible. He strode to the front, through the doors, did acrobatics across the beams on the ceiling to avoid bumping into the packed line of mice (not realizing he could pass right through them), and climbed twenty-two floors. We read several signs and directories telling us where to go if you lived in whatever district, and finally Cowboy got frustrated enough and just went right to the head of the first line he saw.

"Get ready," Avaril said.

I was wondering what for when I realized. Oh yeah. This was going to be intense. And we didn't have a plan.

Once all the mice were standing at the recruiter's table, Khelben knocked that and several other tables over. In the chaos, mice jumping about everywhere looking for who done it, he dropped the veil on Quilah and his group.

While a few mice must have seen the group suddenly appear, Cowboy and Hali rattled their tails and threatened everyone within sight, and were not challenged. Finally, the recruiters got their paperwork and computers up again, and after a minute were ready to go.

"Next!" they said.

Cowboy proudly stood forward. The faces of the mice took on obvious disgust. A dutch (black and white) mouse, daring to show up to enlist? Cowboy thrust his jaw forward, nose high, daring anyone to dispute his right. There were grumblings, but no one told him to go away. He was sent off to the wall where there were laying-pads and a test to take on a computer. He went off to be tested. Hali, after being praised for being so big and strong, did the same. Then came Lily.

Khelben adjusted my sound frequency and I leaned in to whisper in her ear.

"Lily," I said. Her eyes got big. "Repeat exactly what I say."

She did exactly what I told her, and they had no clue she was... Well, not eligible. She went off to take her test, and Karen followed her to help her with that.

Quilah stepped up to the desk, and shrugged off his cloak.

Well, that did it. There was an instant fight.

We had worried about that, but had no idea they wouldn't even give him a chance to speak.

Mice yelled things like "Not a chance!" and "Not serving with Shunned!" and "Whitey must die!" (not kidding). The recruiters did nothing to stop it as the crowd jumped Quilah to remove him from the gene pool.

I held onto him with a tight fitting force field of TK, preventing teeth and claws from harming him, but he went down under the weight of so many mice. Cowboy, Hali and Lily rushed into the fray, diving into the pile of mice and tearing into them. Khelben and Avaril helped everyone out with TK, preventing injuries and lending strength to our group's movements, even incapacitating the crowd when possible, and all while making it look like our group were some serious badass fighters. Which they were, but against these odds, we were turning them into something from a Bruce Lee movie. In seconds they had whipped harsh ass on over 50 mice, and stood around Quilah, tails rattling, faces set in fight-to-the-death mode, well earned from much practice on the streets.

"He's with us!" Hali shouted. "And has every right to join BY LAW!"

The recruiters did nothing. They'd rather see the fight, and none of them wanted to be the one to sign up a true Shunned.

So I broke my first big rule. It wasn't the last, but I crossed the line.

I turned to the recruiter next to me, and focused on him with my mind. I touched his thoughts. I ignored his, and sent him mine.

"Do it," I strongly suggested. "*Sign him up right now.*"

Karen gasped as I used the mind trick. Avaril winced, but realized it had to be done. Khelben slapped his hand into his face. I think that was breaking rule number one. Who cares. Harsh times, harsh measures.

"I will sign him," the mouse said out loud. "He does have the right by the law." He produced the forms on the computer screen. "Everyone back off. He is, as of now, a legal citizen."

Boy, the mice didn't like that. They threatened to riot. The recruiter's own fellows looked like they were going to draw down on him. The fight was going to get bigger. I wondered if we could actually take a huge roomful of these Murines. As they got more and more angry, I decided probably not without tipping our hand and doing some serious divine intervention.

Just before the kettle boiled over, the soldier I had... influenced... drew his pistol and fired a shot into the ceiling.

"Back me up, guys!" he said to his line of fellow recruiters. When they didn't, I influenced them too. They all drew weapons on the crowd.

A loud whistle sound erupted and the soldiers stood to attention. A brown mouse in uniform came crawling in, and actually stood up. All the other mice got lower. The mouse was a high rank, perhaps in our terms a Captain of the Navy. When the room calmed down, the captain, blue eyes glittering, assessed the situation in a few seconds, carefully reading Quilah and the others, and just as I was about to "influence" him too, he spoke.

"They're in," he said. Then he dropped back to all fours and left the room.

And that was that. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

The mice took the test. Cowboy and Hali refused help. Lily cheerfully accepted, liking the game of "put the checks in the boxes we tell you to," and scored a bit too high. We hadn't wanted her to have any job that was hard for her to do. It might require some further adjusting of reality.

Quilah took the test without help, and came up as a non-combative. He was directly against violence. There was no "non-combative" position, however, and so the mice who went over the tests and placed applicants asked him to withdraw. He looked worried. With some anxiety, he looked at me.

"You don't have to join," I told him in our private conversation. "You don't want to, I can tell."

"But I want to be with my friends," he said.

"Then you have to do what we say!" The recruiter told him, not realizing he was talking to me.

"We can work it out," I said. "Do what you want, Quilah."

He turned to the recruiter and said, "I'll do whatever you want me to."

"Janitorial it is," the recruiter said, and pushed the button on the computer screen.

So Quilah got the lowest-of-low jobs.

Cowboy got bridge crew, and was going to be trained to be a weapons officer.

Hali got so high on his test that he got put into Intelligence aboard ship. He would be an officer as well.

Lily was told she would be repair crew aboard a starport in orbit. Avaril nudged Khelben, who focused on the computer. It changed randomly after a flicker of the screen and said "Boarding Party Marine." He looked harder at the computer and it flickered. "Navigation Officer." Harder. "Engineer." He looked too hard at it and it fried, throwing sparks everywhere. Lily drew back only a few inches, looking guilty. The recruiter looked puzzled, looked at her fellow staff on her left and right, who refused to acknowledge what happened, and finally, said to Lily, "What do you like to do?"

Lily thought about it.

"Food," she said.

Lily was placed as a cook's assistant on ship.

"It's okay," she said.

Good enough.

The mice were not given a date. They were given bands that went around their necks and torsos as uniforms, and were to be shipped off to basic training that very hour. They waited in a corner, waiting for the shuttle to take them wherever they would be trained. They sat by themselves, guarded, ignoring racist comments and death threats, as they had all their lives.

We sat with them. Quilah was a bit off to one side, but still within defensive range by his friends.

It might have been my overactive imagination, but he seemed bigger. Stronger. We had only known him a few days. Of course, we'd given him all he could eat, and fresh water. He was growing fast.

"You look worried, buddy," I told him.

"I am," he said. He looked around nervously. "Violence doesn't *solve* anything."

"It solves not letting this other race of mutants come take away your planet," I said. "You get to keep living."

"Is that so important?" he asked. I raised an eyebrow. "When it's the stake of everyone on both planets?"

"Quilah, Khelben told me not to mouth off, but you kinda know me by now. These other mice... they're... not really mice anymore. And they're coming to get you guys. They've got lots of weapons and ships. It's not going to be a fair fight. I mean, we're going to try to make it fair, but we've got our work cut out for us."

"It doesn't matter," Quilah said. "Theres no reason for it."

"Maybe they used up all the food on their planet, or..." I realized I was playing devil's advocate. I felt for Quilah, even if he was living in la-la land.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "There's just *no* good reason at all that we can't get along. All share. Make better things. Better ways."

I looked at him for long seconds. He really believed that. I looked over at Avaril, who overheard us. Her face was chiseled beauty as usual, but I knew her better now. I read concern on her face. This mouse wasn't going to last in a war. He had not one hostile bone in his body.

"Don't mention that," I said. "It'll just get you more outcast."

"Who cares?" he said. "What's that compared to the chance that everyone would wake up and change their ways? The ways that aren't working."

Whoa, I thought.

"*He has a big heart*," Avaril sent to me. After a moment, "*Like you*."

I looked back at her, but she was already looking out a window at the starships being built.

I put a hand on Quilah. I could almost feel his soft fur. I wanted to.

“We will keep you safe,” I said. “While somehow trying to figure out a way to peace.”

He looked up at me.

“You will?”

“Yeah. Nothing will happen to you.”

“No — you’ll try for peace?”

I hesitated. I didn’t think it would work.

“Yeah, we’ll try, buddy.”

His nose twitched affectionately. “Thank you. Thanks, Jared.”

“No worries,” I said. “But Cowboy there...” Cowboy rotated one ear toward us. “Is going to shoot first and ask questions never.”

“You bet,” Cowboy said from twenty feet away.

I got up and went over to sit down between Cowboy and Hali. Both had gold uniforms on with one crossing green band each. Lily’s was green with one white band, and Quilah’s was black. No band. No chance of promotion. Rank and social standing was something they weren’t about to give to a Shunned, I supposed.

“You guys are going to take care of Quilah and Lily,” I said. I tried by myself to modulate my own sound frequency. I don’t know if Khelben helped or not, but it worked. They heard me.

“Yes, we will,” Hali said. “As much as we can.” He looked around, trying to see me. “It’s war, Jared. We won’t be able to protect him from much.”

“I know. We’ll try to be there, but we might have bigger fish to fry.” They looked confused. “He’s not much for fighting, is he?”

“He’s always been that way,” Cowboy said. “He never fights. We’ve always had to protect him. He won’t join in, but we do it anyway.”

“He has very strong beliefs,” Hali said. “Has from his first day.”

“Not quite normal around here,” I said. “Where would he learn that stuff? No Murines I know would teach him that.”

“No one *taught* him that,” Cowboy said. “We tried to teach him the opposite. Stand up for yourself. Be strong. Give better than you get. He won’t learn. He’s not long for this world. In a place where only the strongest survive, he’s a throwback.”

“Shut up,” Hali said. Cowboy actually lowered his chin a bit. “He’s our family. All of us were throwbacks. He has a right to his feelings, even if they are beyond most of us.”

Cowboy felt a bit irritated. “First fight we get into, he’s gonna die,” he said. “And we’re not going to be able to protect him from all of it. We’re going aboard ship. What if we’re one of the lucky ones to see combat?” He looked around for me. “Can you protect an entire ship from destruction?”

I was silent.

I wasn’t sure.

