

CHAPTER 11

Training, Deployment, and an Exchange of Souls

Khelben was going to return to the ship parked in the asteroids. He intended to spend some time studying the planet and the civilization, but he would do so from orbit. He would be leaving us to our own devices. He was trying to solve the bigger picture, I knew, but I still felt a tiny bit abandoned. Avaril said he did this because he had to guard the planet. Somebody had to. It would suck if a Zorian came along while we were out traipsing around — and we probably would be deployed — and wiped out the planet we were supposed to guard. How would we explain that one? But we trusted Khelben to meticulously take no chances. So he didn't. And for the first time, he showed us he cared a little bit by bending the rules for us.

Before we left, he did a telepathy thing we later called the Alpha Knight download. He scanned the Murine ships, all thirty-four classes of them, down to the atoms. He memorized all of it. It took him several hours.

Then he asked us for our permission. When we gave it, he taught us how they worked. He gave us every skill required to run them, fix them, fly them, and even build them. Straight up, via telepathy, right into our brains. That part only took seconds.

And suddenly, just like that, I understood physics, engineering, computer science, quantum theory. I was a master navigator, a perfect pilot, a flawless engineer, and all at a genius level at the top of my game. There was no piece of that ship, no matter how tiny, I couldn't handle like a grand master — probably more than any Murine alive. I suddenly had one hundred skills it would have taken me eighty lifetimes to learn on Earth. If Earth had starships. And was about one thousand years more advanced. It blew our minds. All of us. We understood every inner working of every single class of Murine starship. Every single piece of technology. Every machine, every wire, nut and bolt. Every. Last. Detail. Just like that. It didn't hurt. It didn't drive us mad. It was easy.

It was just flat-out amazing.

But, being me, I had to push it. So before he left, I asked him to show me just one more thing. No, I'm not going to tell you what it was yet. We'll get there.

I honestly think he might have considered us all fools for becoming attached to single entities (or one single entity) on our mission. Alpha Knights considered that a bad mistake, apparently. Perhaps he thought Vashtarr had wasted his time choosing us. Oops, there I go again. Bad stories, see? What did I know of Khelben's thoughts? He didn't share them. His face didn't show them. I didn't know, and that drove me crazy. Avaril was right. My imagination filled in the blanks. Not good. Especially when my imagination could dictate reality.

So our guide went off, back to the asteroid belt, and left us alone on our mission — and shortly after that, we actually ended up really alone for the first time. But first came training.

Basic training was exceptionally hard on Quilah. It was a breeze for Cowboy, who regularly got into fights over his half-breed coat, or when defending Quilah. Hali soared through it, talking his way out of most scuffles wherein he would defend his friends, confusing his opponents by battering their wits into submission with grace and skill. Lily fought only when Quilah was threatened, but when she did, she threw herself whole hog at her foes with wild abandon, like a badger mouse going berserk. After which she would calm down immediately, often

bleeding, and say, “It’s okay. It’s all okay.” After a few times of that, no one wanted to cross her anymore. She was apparently ferocious and insane. And, by proxy, Quilah had it a bit easier, because Lily would stay by his side, even when she was positioned somewhere else. She got in trouble for it often, but didn’t care. I mentioned to one of the drill sergeants “Want to mess with someone who’s going to be making the food?” His mind churned it over and the trainers decided that as long as Lily participated in some sort of hardship, it was okay.

Just like she always said it was.

But Quilah was denied food and roused from sleep. The sergeants gave him the most horrible jobs. He was cleaning foul and nasty things before he was even at his janitorial station. He was given all the worst duties. He was bullied and beaten when he was found alone a few times. I took to his side even more than Lily, and made sure that unfortunate things happened to those who even threatened him. Before long, all the mice knew it was back luck to piss off whitey’s guardian spirits. They didn’t have a word for spirits or angels, but they knew.

All of this Quilah took in stride. He didn’t buckle or run. He didn’t become depressed or despair. He did as he was told, and seemed genuinely happy to belong to his society, even in a bottom-of-the-barrel way. My group marveled at his attitude. You just couldn’t keep him down.

Often he was made to march all night in circles in the rain, with 150 pounds on his back, holding a rifle in his teeth the entire time, singing cadence. No reason. Perhaps just to get him out of the barracks so the other soldiers wouldn’t complain about his smell. (He smelled just fine, I even liked his smell. They were just looking for excuses to pick on him.) One morning, when everyone came out to line up after Quilah had been kept up all night by cruel drills, he got over to his spot, dead tired, drooping and spent, but straightened himself to attention anyway.

The drill sergeant mouse called him by his new nickname, “Why are you so sorry looking, Worthless?”

Quilah yelled out, “Because I don’t want anyone to get mad at me for being first in line, Drill Sergeant!”

Lily laughed out loud and was made to do pushups all day long while one of the sergeants sat on her back. And even so, she followed Quilah around the whole day with that mouse on her back while doing them.

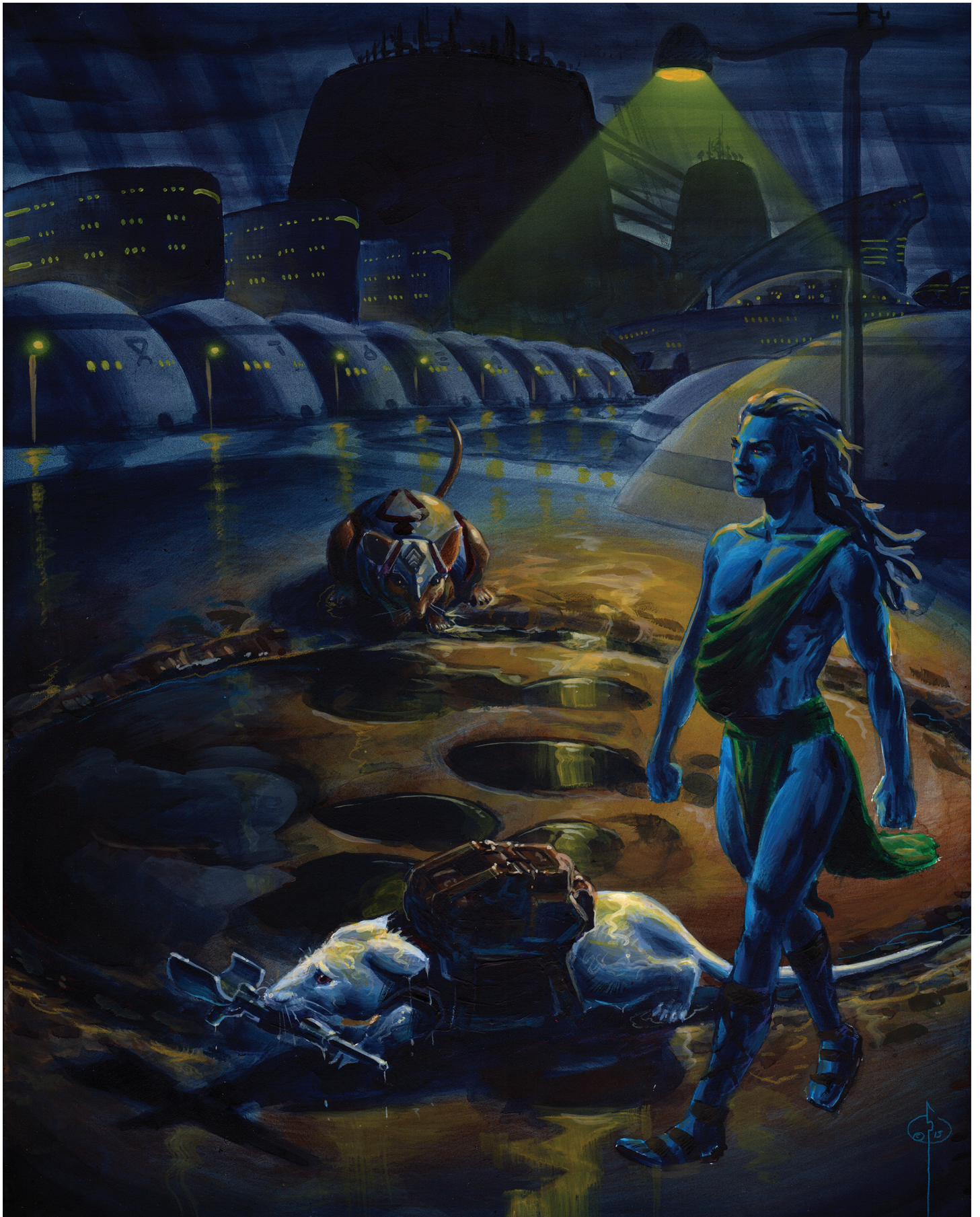
Quilah was stealing all our hearts, but he already had mine. I was endeared to the fellow, and there wasn’t any logic to it, but my mind tried to find some anyway. Everything about him just felt good. Around him, one couldn’t help but be happier. Feel better. Even those who picked on him felt it. Around Quilah, things just went... right for some reason. Good luck followed him and anyone near him, and it had nothing to do with his invisible guardians. To seal the deal, he had the most lovable face I’d ever seen on any person or animal. He wore his soul there, open and exposed, in his expressions, in the ruby glint of his eyes. In his heart-melting smile.

There was just no way to know him and not love him. All of us felt it.

After basic training, which Quilah survived by the skin of his tail, they were sent to special training. Quilah was sent to learn to be a janitor. His trainer refused to have anything to do with him, and Quilah had to fend for himself during the days. He spent most of it hiding under buildings while I accompanied him. He joked that he wasn’t going to be Shunned much longer — his white coat was getting brown.

Cowboy was sent to Bridge Crew Weapons Training. He was doing just fine. Learning to aim and fire missiles, lasers, and particle cannons. He was in heaven.

Hali was taken somewhere secret. Well, not secret to us. He was taken to High Command Intelligence School. The elite of the elite. Secret special-forces spook stuff. We checked in on him every now and then. He finally got his desperately coveted education, and became truly dangerous. He was being trained to use his amazing intelligence for the good of the military and the culture. He was given tests, put in the highest category, and then trained as an intelligence officer. He would be given a more-than-decent starting rank. Within two weeks, his uniform already had three green bands. He was soaring through the system. After he was taught to a doctorate-level education in science, physics, and computers, he was trained in everything the Murines knew about the enemy. Ships, technology, racial traits, weaknesses (there weren’t many), and how to learn more. He



would be put aboard ship in the hopes of enemy contact, and he would be there to learn more any way he could. For that reason, even high-ranking officers aboard ship had to listen to him.

He did all of this in weeks. I just couldn't imagine a race that learned and worked so fast. What could they do once they spread out into the universe? Humans wouldn't ever be able to stop them. A race of agile, intelligent mice that could build a starship in a week? Learn eight years' worth of college in under a month? I was staggered with the potential of it. Their planet had no predators. They had done away with all of them early on in their evolution. They had up to twenty children at a time, and could do so extremely often. What was holding them in check? Why wasn't their population out of control? It seemed to be one of the great Murine mysteries, like The Leavetaking, that even Vasserians weren't privy to.

Lily was taught how to make food. She spent most of the time eating her creations, and got big quick. She was happy. Giddy and delighted were better words. Lily lived in heaven almost anywhere she went. Karen mentioned a strong sense of being happy for the girl, but also wishing we could unlock that secret for ourselves. Lily was like a female Buddha. Smiling, laughing, and playing all the time. Our four mice were growing up too fast. But not Lily. She refused, and grew big anyway.

They all grew very quickly. Basic training *and* advanced training lasted only three weeks total. These Murines did everything fast. Grew fast, learned fast.

There were plenty of "accidents" in which Quilah should have been killed, including a grenade that somehow got lost in a sewer pit he was cleaning. But somehow, he miraculously survived every time, unscathed. We liked to joke about it. If anyone had been really paying attention, there would have been a full-blown investigation, but no. He was Shunned. No one paid him or what happened to him any mind. But the mice knew. The low ranks who hated him knew it full well. The mouse who had placed the grenade had a bad fall while climbing the 300-foot wall the next day and broke his back.

Avaril frowned at me, but didn't seem entirely judgmental. Before they could tear him to pieces, he experienced a full recovery as Avaril expertly used all her concentration and manipulated the molecules of his back back into full health. That was a real trick on anything alive, even though it was only bone. She was getting good at all kinds of power. We all were, but none of us faster than she by a long shot. She could tesser any two of us over one hundred feet, carrying gear. She could do it while we were moving, and either keep our momentum or change it, even while changing our direction. Her abilities were leaving the rest of us in the dust, while still not even approaching one-one-hundredth of Khelben's.

By the end of training, Karen could tell us when bad things were going to happen at least fifty percent of the time. It wasn't reliable, and it was terribly random, but sometimes it was an edge. She could see other places, hear things thousands of miles away. She heard the news of Quilah reaching High Command. She heard them allow him to stay, sure he would die and that would be the end of it. She heard them assign him and the others to a very special post.

Our mice were assigned to a starship. Now that was a special job, because most mice wanted to be serving aboard an actual starship. Such warships were still very rare. Ninety-nine percent of everyone in their military served at home — building, cleaning up, handling resources, or in defense of their homeland should the enemy ever set foot on Muscilan soil. Only special mice got ships.

But this ship was an old long-range scout. A fast light cruiser, armed but barely, being sent out to the edge of Atraxian space.

A sacrifice to see what the enemy was capable of?

Of course, they had orders to flee if seen, and gather as much information as possible beforehand. No Murine ship had ever survived a direct conflict with Atraxian warships yet. Hali was given a special escape pod, capable of faster-than-light travel, to get him back safely with his data. He told his friends this, upon seeing them for the first time in a month. He told them, in no uncertain terms, that they had been selected for a suicide mission.

“Wow, you’re tall!” was Quilah’s response.

“Tall,” Lily agreed.

“And you’re fat!” Hali laughed at Lily. “Goodness, who would have ever thought any of us would be lucky enough to end up fat? That’s great!” She smiled. “Cowboy, you’re looking good as ever, Ensign!”

“Lieutenant Commander,” Cowboy answered his higher-ranking friend formally, but he was smiling.

“Don’t worry, there’s room enough in my luxury pod for all of us,” Hali said.

“Food and water?” Cowboy said.

“No, but we won’t be alone, will we?” Quilah said.

“Is there room enough for them in the pod?” Cowboy asked.

The mice seemed disturbed. Hali shook his head.

We don’t need no stinkin’ pod, I thought. I hoped. I knew Khelben didn’t. He could survive space for long enough to get out to the asteroid belt and back.

But across light years?

We might be out of luck then.

This was getting more and more exciting.

So the mice were placed aboard the *Quick Tooth*. It was a 5,000-ton light cruiser built for speed, not fighting. Still, it had armor, thirty pulse lasers, ten missile racks, ten beam lasers, and one particle cannon mounted on the spine. It could deliver some pain.

They were sworn into service under Captain Mevner Froshnel, and we found it interesting that the ship had only one janitor. Quilah.

The *Quick Tooth* only had few months of service under its belt. It was an older ship, and had been repaired several times. Most starships were much newer. Plenty of ships had been lost that had gone outside their solar system in the direction of Atrax. So I guess if you were going to sacrifice a ship, it made sense to make it an older, beat-up vessel — and put a crew aboard you didn’t mind losing. Murines were amazingly human.

This ship was being sent to the edge of Atraxian space itself. Not to the actual solar system, but just one parsec over. The ship left the starport to the cheers and cries of family and friends watching it go. And a group of protesters, much larger, with signs that said “Good riddance, Shunned!” and “Do US a favor — Eject Yourself into Space.”

Quilah ignored it all and did his job, which turned out to be much harder than usual when the mice aboard ship formed a silent agreement to not use the sewer facilities at every opportunity. Quilah had his hands full, literally, picking up poo and mopping up gallons of piss left anywhere that wasn’t directly underfoot. When I asked him if he wanted me to do something, he smiled sweetly and replied, “I like being busy. I have an important job. The ship doesn’t stink because of me!”

I wished I could hug him. Other mice spent countless time grooming each other, which was a standard affection taken for granted. No one groomed Quilah. He had to do what he could himself, but there were spots he couldn’t reach, and he wasn’t given time. I gave him TK grooming whenever he had a spare minute before he slept, and it put him right to sleep, but he was almost never granted that spare minute.

We Vasserians, on the other hand, had extra time on our hands as the ship entered jump and travelled across space between stars at a snail’s pace (to us). We were all acutely aware that we were well outside of telepathy range in seconds. There would be no calling Khelben for help from deep space. He wouldn’t even know we were in trouble if it came. The thoughts made all of us uneasy. And they weren’t bad stories. We really were out of reach. But after a brief “Oh shit” look at each other, we sucked it up and pretended we knew what we were doing.

One of us was always with Quilah, and often all of us hung out in his closet-sized room that probably actually *was* a closet and not a stateroom at all. No one would bunk with him. On occasion Cowboy visited him, brought

him food from the galley (where Lily made him special things all the time), and replaced things other crew members stole from him. Hali would stop by more rarely from his studies and ask if he needed anything. Quilah always said he was doing great. The closet wasn't heated, and his blankets were always getting stolen. One of us was always there to warm the room, but Hali built a portable heater for Quilah. When that was stolen, Hali rerouted the ship's heating ducts into the room, and with our help, made a small vent so Quilah wouldn't freeze to death.

When not with Quilah, we spent some time on the bridge, some time in engineering, some time in the galley watching Lily. Everyone got along with her. Everyone liked her. She never caused any trouble there. She tried to sleep with Quilah several times in the beginning, but they dragged her off to the brig and after a few times of that and not being fed, she stopped quite reluctantly, and was actually depressed for a few days. Quilah told her it was alright finally, when he was cleaning the galley, and promised her he was well cared for by us. He told her to make new friends. She accepted it as though nothing had happened.

Twelve jumps and two weeks later, finally the ship dropped out of jump to begin patrols along the edge of the Red Zone, in Sector Fifteen. Days passed. The crew was tense, but space remained quiet. The captain reminded everyone that the actual odds of encountering other ships this far out was very small indeed. They were here to watch and learn, nothing more.

Of course, nobody knew how far the enemy's long-range scans reached.

And nobody really believed the captain.

But the odds were still slim.

We were sitting in the cargo hold, all three of us, watching Quilah clean the entire place, which didn't need cleaning and was one hundred feet across the short way. Quilah, of course, was grateful, citing that he wasn't cleaning up feces or urine. He had a point.

I got bored. And it was about time.

"Why are you guys here?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Karen said. She had been mesmerized watching Quilah move in his graceful, mousey way.

"He asked what our particular issues were," Avaril said. "Why we were able to come through the Chronos Reactor."

Sharp. Direct. A bit scary.

"Well, yeah," I said. "It's been almost three months. We should know each other better."

"You'd like that?" she asked, slightly smiling.

"Sure," I said.

They didn't say anything.

"Okay," I said. "I can start. I was really unhappy. My life sucked. I had a great life once. I was at the top of my game. I was going to vet school after getting a masters in religious studies. I was going to be married to a girl named Sarina. I was making money. My future looked bright."

I waited.

"What happened?" Karen said. Thanks, Karen.

"I got sick," I said. "It started slow. Like a constant cold. Then it was a constant flu. I had to drop out of school. I lost my job. My fiancée canceled the wedding. We tried to fix things, but she left me. One day she was just gone, and all her stuff was missing. I just couldn't cope. I was getting more and more sick every week. It lasted two years. By the end, I was in the hospital, dying. I weighed one hundred pounds."

Avaril was paying attention now. "What was it?" she asked.

"No one knew," I said. "They brought the priest, which I refused, and a pharmacopsychiatrist, who is basically the doc who asks you if you want to die on drugs, all out of it, so you aren't aware you're dying. But I was dying. A horrible death. Turned out to be mold."

"You're shitting me," Avaril said.

"No, really. Black mold. *Stachybotrys*. It eats nerve tissue and got into my brain."

"That's fucked up," she said.

"Yeah."

"How did they fix it?" Karen asked.

"They didn't." I looked at them with spooky eyes. "I died."

Both girls were silent.

I started laughing at my own hilarity, but the girls weren't sharing the fun. Oh, okay then. I continued.

"Back home, I still have a list of symptoms as long as my arm. They don't really have a treatment for it. The AMA made it illegal to diagnose mold as a disease. Too much money lost by Big Pharma and lawsuits, etc. The doctors never even considered it. It was the pharmapsychiatrist who suggested it, off the record. I got mad. I didn't want to die that way. I knew I was meant for greater things. I refused. Eventually, my insurance cancelled me and they had to let me go home."

Avaril's almond eyes were bright and wide. Karen had a look of sympathy on her face that ran deep. I wasn't looking for pity, but I continued the story.

"But I couldn't go home, because that's where the mold was. And I couldn't afford anywhere else. So I lived in my car. For a year. I had a great lawsuit, even though I don't really believe in those. The owner of the apartment was a complete asshole, and refused to even talk to me. All I wanted was my rent taken care of while I had been hospitalized. Some lawyer told me he could get me seven million or so, but he was an asshole himself, and after telling me he would take care of everything, he dropped the ball and let the statue of limitations run out. So I was broke, living in campgrounds, and all my stuff had to be destroyed. It was corrupted and couldn't be saved. My pets all died before I was put in the hospital, and mold makes you stupid — especially when it's eating your brain — so I couldn't figure out that it was something environmental. That should have been so easy to see. But I couldn't do it."

Avaril put her hand on my shoulder and gave a light squeeze. Her gentle, kind soul showed through her armor and I felt my heart skip a beat.

"So I struggled, with some help from what family I had left, and very very slowly, relearned how to do things, how to think, how to remember things. But my old life was gone. I had trouble even climbing stairs, and I suffered migraines that made me deaf, and mini-strokes that paralyzed me. I fought for years. I took whatever work I could, usually at universities or churches, even though I'm not religious, or animal rescues. Eventually I took this job at a lab. Caring for the mice used in experiments. It's awful. I didn't know what I was in for. I was trying to do some good. And... my pets had been mice."

Avaril chuckled. Karen followed, and I started laughing too.

"I know," I said. "The irony." I looked down at the metal floor. "I was trying to do good for the poor little guys, but I wasn't prepared for the reality of it. They do horrible things to those poor mice." I looked across the giant room. Quilah had his ears perked. He could probably hear me. "Ironically, because they are so close to humans genetically. It's so sad."

I sighed. "So, back home, I'm still crippled. At a job that's eating what's left of my soul. On drugs that keep me crippled to save me from suffering a fatal stroke. At least once a week I suffer an attack that paralyzes me for hours and makes me feel like shit for days. I lose control of my... Well, it just sucks. I was done. I didn't have much to live for anymore. Everything I had wanted all of my life was gone. My future wasn't what I had planned. I wasn't going to see my fondest wish come true. I wasn't going to do what I was born to do. Everything was hopeless. Every single day, it was an epic struggle just to keep going."

Avaril gently said, "What was that? Your fondest wish?"

I hung my head down. Well, I had started it. Might as well not quit when it got tough.

I looked up into nothing, at the far end of the cargo bay. My last piece of armor was coming off.

"All I wanted was to meet my soul mate, and spend the rest of my life with her, making a difference. Making her life a magical wonder. Making the world a better place. Telling stories. Making everyone happy." I looked down again. "Ever since I was born. I don't know why. That's all I ever wanted. I thought Sarina was the one for sure, but when things went south, it just... shattered all my illusions. I realized I had been living in a fantasy up till then. I couldn't cope." I looked up again, eyes glowing with forming tears. "I snapped. I had no story to replace my original with. I lived in la-la land, and then got evicted."

The girls were silent. I felt very alone in that cargo bay. So, I talked, changing the subject, to cover my unease. As usual.

"I didn't really think I'd go through with it, but apparently, if the High Council is right, six months later, I did. You think they can really see the future?" I sounded worried. This was a dream. I had to wake up sooner or later.

"I don't know," Avaril said. "They said it was a likely possibility. I heard the word prescience mentioned. That's not clairvoyance, where one can see the future for sure. It's more like seeing the most likely outcomes, and following paths of those outcomes to other possible consequences. I have no doubt they can do that. Or some of them can."

"I don't want to go back and kill myself," I said. "I just want to get well. I want to live a happy life, doing good, making the world a better place. Somehow."

"You won't kill yourself," Avaril said. "I have faith in you. You're strong. And smart, despite your low self-esteem. You aren't what you do, or what you have, or your body. You're this," she touched my chest. "You're deep and good, and have the heart of a Knight."

I lowered my head. I felt my Vasserian gut lurch.

She put her fingers on my chin and raised my face up to hers. Her eyes were so beautiful.

"It's obvious to everyone but you," she said. "You won't ever quit on those you love. It's your gift. Don't quit on yourself. You're no quitter."

God, she had me pegged. She saw right through my joking, sarcastic, witty personality shield.

I think that was the first moment we really saw each other. But it was too intimate. We both ran from it.

I faked a soft laugh. "My dad used to read me the stories of the Arthurian Legends when I was a boy. I grew up on tales of good people doing great things through terrible hardship. I just never imagined for the life of me that my hardship would be brain damage."

"It isn't damaged now," Karen said.

I nodded. She was right. I felt human again. Superhuman.

"I don't want to wake up," I said.

"Me neither," Karen said. "I have cancer."

Avaril and I looked at her.

She smiled, somewhat bitterly. "Yeah."

Neither of us knew what to say.

"Stage four," she said. "Pancreatic cancer. Not good odds. My body was in the hospital when I came here. I chalked this up to the drugs at first. The doctors tell me I've got weeks to live. If I'm lucky."

A long pause ensued. She just turned back and watched Quilah, who was definitely listening, as if nothing had been said. She didn't expect a response, apparently. We all sat there awhile. What do you say to that?

The awkward silence dragged on. Finally, I couldn't stand it.

"And you, Wonder Woman?" I said to Avaril.

I watched her consider not answering. This woman was guarded. She almost never linked up empathically or telepathically to anyone. She kept to herself. Her strength was born of hardship and a gift from heaven. But she was not one to trust easily. Minutes passed. I gave up. Only the sound of Quilah sweeping carried across the

artificially generated air.

“I fought to not end up as my parents,” she finally said into the cargo hold. After a few more seconds, “I grew up poor, and left to my own. I had little, but wanted everything. I wanted to go to college. I wanted to take care of myself. I fought tooth and nail for survival when I was younger, but as an adult I achieved. It was easy. I set my goals and went for them with everything I had. I made it. I lived on nothing, and saved every penny. I started a small business after working for years to make enough money to buy it. I grew it, bought another. And another. Within five years I was wealthy, and bought bigger things. I joined large companies as a consultant for success. Everyone wanted my get-up-and-go attitude, my fire, my determination. I learned that not many people had my talent for the obvious, or for common sense.” She looked at me cutely. “I started teaching it to people, with enough clout to make money just doing lectures and seminars. I charged ridiculous amounts just to go in and tell people how to fix their businesses. If they took my advice, they succeeded. Those that didn’t, didn’t. And that reputation got around. I had everything I had aimed for in abundance.” She looked troubled.

I went for a hunch I had been keeping for some time.

“Except?” I said, raising one eyebrow.

She looked at me as if I had read her mind through her shields. Maybe I had. It took her a full thirty seconds to reply. I was surprised she did. And she did it looking right into my eyes.

“There had to be more,” she said.

“More?” Karen said.

“More to life.” Avaril stayed locked on my eyes. I felt light headed. Was that possible for Vasserians?

Her eyes had me. I felt my heartbeat increase.

“What more did you...” I started.

A thunderous klaxon rang out of nowhere, and kept ringing in long pulses. Quilah dropped his broom and held his ears. It would have been deafening to a human. The lights in the cargo hold turned red. Well, so much for odds.

“What the fuck?!” Karen shouted over the punishing sound.

“ALL CREW TO BATTLE STATIONS,” the loudspeaker shouted. “RED ALERT. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. ALL CREW TO BATTLE STATIONS. WE HAVE MADE CONTACT WITH THE ENEMY.”

