

CHAPTER 13

The Season in the Sun

We limped back home. It took us sixteen jumps, and a total of three weeks. Myself, Avaril and Karen had to hold the ship together by pure force. We ran out of juice early on, and couldn't matter manipulate much of anything after that. We all felt weary to our souls and took turns trance-napping while the others held the ship in one piece. Our basic powers, TK, telepathy, the things that weren't too complex, worked barely. It turned out our Vasserian bodies were immune to radiation. It was the second miracle of the adventure that we made it home at all.

The first miracle was that our little Quilah Laoshu, healed everyone on the ship. Even from the radiation. But he did so in his sleep. He couldn't do it while conscious. He couldn't make it happen — it just seemed to happen on its own. When he was asleep, he would wander the wrecked, dangerous ship, finding sick and wounded mice, and restore them to full health. Even mice that had tried to kill him, take his food, or torment him. And all of it in a trance we didn't dare wake him from. After one day of it, the word spread.

Captain Cowboy and Second Officer Hali kept their brother with them on the bridge. Often by force, for he wanted to help clean up and repair the ship when he was awake. He would try to sneak off, but the bridge crew were under orders to not let him out the door. They slept there, guarding him. The rest of the ship was too unstable and windows, bulkheads and random walls were blowing out during jump. Quilah's closet was no longer there. It had been lost somewhere in deep space ten light years back.

When Quilah was asleep, Cowboy and Hali opened the doors and let the sick and wounded come in. We all watched as Quilah rose from his makeshift bed, eyes closed, in his weird trance, and placed his hands on them. They recovered instantly. Every one of them. Within a few days, the remainder of the crew was without wound, radiation, or illness. Which was good, because we had no idea what we were going to do to stave off the rest of the planet when this ship returned to port and the populace tore them apart for being weak. We could barely stand on our own feet, and our powers were down to a trickle that we used every drop of to sustain the life support and engines.

The ship's crew rushed about at all hours in a dramatic frenzy to patch the ship enough to keep going. Of twelve main corridors, only four were still traversable. Engineering, the bridge, and the main systems were made a priority. The kitchen was missing. If Lily had been there when the attack happened, she would be a frozen body hurtling through space now. She never left Quilah's side, but she was a lot quieter now. The fight had taken something out of her that Quilah hadn't been able to heal. She was still happy and friendly, but no longer so ignorant. She and Quilah didn't want to be in the Murine Navy anymore, but their quarter of service, which I gathered was supposed to be a long time in Murine terminology, had only begun.

There was no food, and only small reserves of water. Matter manipulation, what little we could manage, had to be spent constantly repairing small parts of the ship that broke down as it attempted to give up the ghost. We refused it that kindness. Mice went hungry. And thirsty.

Not one member of the crew gave Quilah an ounce of shit. They stayed clear of him as if he both carried the

plague and could kill them with his eyeballs if he wanted. They were both afraid of him, and revered him. Crew members brought him what little food they had and laid it at his feet. He didn't like the treatment, but it was better than trying to kill him. He thanked everyone profusely and told them not to treat him any differently than any other crew member. He gave the food away when nobody was looking, sneaking it in small increments into others' handful-sized rations. They went on like that, bringing him things, food, and their apologies, and he went on giving it away.

I realized I never had a chance to know this mouse. I had automatically loved him without reason. His close family did as well. None of it had any logic to it. Around that white little boy, now a young man, all living beings simply felt at peace.

Cowboy and Hali clearly discussed what happened, but neither of them had an explanation. When he did his healing, Quilah was a blank, and when he was told what he had done, all he said was, "I wish I had been able to reach more. So many died." He himself took two weeks to heal from his own damage. He limped around and moved with pain for the entire first week. Considering a human would have been hospitalized for months, his healing was phenomenal, but not like that Jesus action we saw.

We had no explanation for it, either. We watched it happen. With our Alpha Knight eyes, we saw the bones knit, the flesh grow back, leaving not even scars. We saw arteries fuse and blood created from nothing. Nerves healed spontaneously. All kinds of damage that shouldn't have been fixable was just... fixed. There was no energy movement we could see, and it wasn't matter manipulation. What seemed like ages ago, Khelben had told us matter manipulation was extremely difficult on living tissue anyway, it was so complex. He had never even attempted it. Rank Five-Plus Knights sometimes decided to risk learning those skills with their second most powerful gift. But usually not. Healing was rare, even among Alpha Knights.

So Quilah was a genuine miracle, it seemed. He couldn't reproduce the effect consciously. He almost denied doing it, and we had a ship to hold together, so we left it alone.

We made it home to port. An hour before the solar system came into range, Cowboy organized the crew into a meeting. What remained of them fit on the bridge. The screen wall Cowboy stood in front of had been repaired, but it was a mash of girders, melted metal, plaster, glue, and support rods.

"Murines of the *Quick Tooth*," he said. "It is my last order as captain that we all hold sacred what has happened here." He looked at Quilah, who looked back with wide eyes, embarrassed. "We have been saved. We will not be killed on returning. The story of our glory has gone before us on transmission signals, but what really happened we are going to keep to ourselves. That's an order. Does everyone understand?"

The crew raised fists, noses, and tails and yelled out, "Aye, aye, Captain!"

Cowboy nodded.

Mice love gossip, but somehow, I believed that none of these loyalist would squeal. They followed Cowboy with absolute faith, but they also understood that Quilah had done was bigger than what they could understand. They owed the Shunned. And their captain.

The ship couldn't dare attempt reentry, so we docked at the orbiting starport where the entire dying vessel's crew was greeting by a massive crowd, a band, lights, cheers, and confetti. They were heroes. Even when Quilah came out last, he was smiled upon and patted on the back, albeit reluctantly, by some. His smile was heartwarming. I saw some healing finally come to his soul upon receiving the acceptance.

As for we Vasserians, we fell to the ground and began devouring dirt and rocks. Literally. We had been eating ship debris for weeks, using precious energy to shift it into our spectrum of reality, carefully controlling our hunger so we didn't deprive the mice of their ride home. Now that we were back on the ground, it was a see-food diet. We ate anything in sight that wasn't alive. And it all tasted fantastic as our bodies turned it almost instantly into pure energy. We acted like a bunch of castaways that just came across a fast-food joint.

It wasn't questioned that the crew was uninjured. They were hungry, emaciated, and weary, but they still had

the strength to march to the stage and receive medals of honor from the admiral there. Cowboy was given The Murine Diamond, the highest award possible in all the land. The rest were given medals for bravery and valor. Coming in last, Quilah was given his medals as well. The crowd applauded a tiny bit, and when the crew heard the pathetic praise, they put their own hands together. Cowboy and his mice turned to face Quilah and gave their most hearty applause. Quilah looked back and smiled shyly. He had tears in his eyes.

During the ceremony, Khelben tessered in to stand with us.

Only one fifth of the crew lived. It turned out half or more had died from direct damage. Another large number from the impact, some quickly from radiation, and the rest from The Leavetaking. About ten or fifteen percent just up and died because they lost friends.

Those that remained were national champions. They were all given promotions. Cowboy was raised directly to captain. Don't pass go, don't collect 200 dollars. Hali was swept away by the equivalent of the mice in black for debriefing. We decided he would be alright and didn't follow. Lily was acting strangely and refused to leave Quilah's side. When she was cornered by mice whose job it was to evaluate the condition of the crew, Quilah defended her, and Cowboy defended him.

"She's traumatized from the combat," Quilah said. "She needs rest."

"The system doesn't offer rest," an officer said. "You know that, Shunned. She pulls her weight, or else."

"She can pull her weight," Quilah said, "In the kitchens at home. She can't be deployed again. She has a panic reaction to combat." He lied a bit. Only a bit.

The officer squinted suspiciously at Quilah. "What makes you so sure?"

Quilah balked, but Cowboy took up the fight.

"Quilah replaced our medic on board in combat," he said. "I promoted him to chief medical officer. He healed more crew than ten medics after we defeated those *enemy* ships." He wasn't lying there. "We owe him our lives. His rank isn't official yet, but this Murine is a Lieutenant Commander now. You need to salute him, *mouse*."

The lieutenant shrank back. Cowboy was a war hero. He wore The Murine Diamond. No mouse would mess with that.

"Sir, yes, Sir!" The lieutenant saluted and ran off.

Cowboy looked over at Quilah after he was gone and they chuckled. Lily seemed relieved.

In the days that followed, the *Quick Tooth* was retired and turned into scrap or parts for other ships. Cowboy was without a command.

Lily was given an honorable discharge from the Navy after being evaluated and found incompetent. We didn't interfere. She just smiled and nodded and said, "It's okay. Everything's okay." And they let her go, with pay for combat, victory, and pension. It wasn't much, but Quilah spent his income and bonuses to take care of the rest for her, and got her a nice home in a nice neighborhood. Lily got a good job working in the kitchens on base, preparing food for the troops and workers building ships. They couldn't refuse her. She had been on the *Quick Tooth*. She was famous. So she got to cook and even tell others what to do around food, so she was happy. Quilah stayed with her when he wasn't on base, since she was always coming to find him after work anyway, whether or not the authorities allowed it.

Hali returned after a few days. He had been promoted to captain after bringing Muscila more information on the Atrax than they had ever been able to gather before. He had been thrown to the wolves and come back with gold. He was indispensable now. He had some real power, and his career was still young.

The story of their victory over three heavier, better armed vessels spread through the entire planet. They were celebrities overnight, but for the most part fame didn't exist on Muscila. They didn't have that weird response to being well known that humans do, worshipping entertainers and famous people. What it did do for them was grant them status and power in society. They could tell others what to do. Quilah couldn't, but the other crew members all ascended to high positions right away. Most of them handled it quite well, and enjoyed their new

stations without arrogance. Well, Cowboy abused it some, but mostly to get things for Quilah and Lily.

Quilah applied for actual medical training, and with strings pulled by his two brothers, got what he wanted. The training was harsh, and the Murines still treated him poorly, but the story that even a Shunned had helped defeat the Atrax was making him the poster child for racial reform — a movement just born as we watched. Some Murines, not most, began changing their mind. High Command allowed him to hold rank as an ensign, the minimum required to enter medical training. He didn't get lieutenant commander, but he seemed overjoyed to be a genuine ensign instead of a non-promotable Space-Murine Recruit. He got a blue uniform with a green and white band. He was proud of it, and treated it with special affection. Meaning he slept in it.

The Atrax retaliated and destroyed several more ships that ventured too far out — a line that was shrinking back toward Muscila. The enemy was pushing slowly forward. Day by day, they claimed more space, and more lives.

The mice built ships like a massive machine making up for lost time. We watched them build their first heavy battle cruiser, a beautiful ship, in a week. It was astounding how fast they moved.

And we finally decided to intervene.

After seeing the Atrax, and agreeing that we were here to preserve this species as ordered, we talked Khelben into sharing some of his personal knowledge with us about technology. He argued, and resisted, but he lost against all three of us. We spent long hours preparing our argument, and didn't give him a chance to breathe once we pressed him. Silly us. Afterward we realized he didn't need to breathe. His Alpha Knight brain could outthink us in under a millionth of a second. Maybe he had wanted to intervene. Maybe he just had to make it look good for the record. Either way, he relented and downloaded the knowledge to us over days, and gave us a tech boost to our education. Now we were extremely high-tech star-faring-age scientists, engineers, mechanics, computer programmers, far beyond what the Murines would achieve in one thousand years. Enough to improve upon the Murine technology by quite a bit. Our human minds were overwhelmed, but it was enough to get the job done. We invisible spirits took the information to Hali and he presented it to the government as "stolen technology" studied and acquired in the battle. The High Command praised him up and down, gave him a promotion to commodore, and we were able to feed them information to balance the scales.

Boy, did we ever feed them information. Maybe too much, looking back on it.

We taught the mice to build much better hull armor. Armor one-tenth the weight and mass for one hundred times the protection. We taught them to build nuclear dampening shields. We gave them meson cannons, capable of igniting massive explosions *inside* a ship, right through the armor. We improved their own particle cannons a hundredfold and made their beam weapons ninety-nine percent more accurate with ten times the range. We made their missiles more like energy torpedoes (we lovingly called them photons) and their ships no longer needed jump drives or hydrogen power plants. We gave them ion power, then when that wasn't quite enough, anti-matter. They figured out on their own how to turn that into a weapon in just days.

Those were just a few examples of what we gifted them with, just on Khelben's surface knowledge of what existed out there in the universe. The easy, common stuff. He mentioned a race called the Thoovians, who directly served Vasserians, and who had a force field called The Blue Screen, several hundred million years past the tech levels of almost any other race, capable of nullifying 99% of any energy that touched it, and then turning it around to power anything they wanted, even an entire planet. Thoovian ships that used this technology, which was common for them, were able to hide in the hearts of stars indefinitely and never ran out of power. He wouldn't let us give it to the mice, of course. He argued that we had already given them enough to turn them into an unbalanced, high-power race that might dominate the galaxy they lived in. We argued — what was wrong with that? But the Stone Man didn't cave. He wouldn't bend on cloaking devices, either. No fun.

Weeks went by after we gave the mice enough information and technology to completely transform their society. They used it all. Their production went up 2,000 percent. Which didn't go unnoticed by the Atraxians.



"His New Uniform"

The battles came closer and closer to home. High Command knew it was just a matter of time.

Quilah graduated medical school and became the first Shunned doctor in history. Many tried to block his graduation. It was a huge controversy. But by then Hali was too powerful, and he made sure his brother graduated with the appropriate honors he had earned. His uniform was now blue with a solid white band.

But what he did next reminds me of a story.

Once upon a time, children would sit outside the Shaolin temple, waiting through all the seasons for the slim chance that they might be chosen to become a monk. Only one in one hundred was chosen. Most gave up.

Anyway, one day this boy who lasted a few years sitting outside was chosen. And right away, the master came to the boy.

"I am going to tell you the secret of true happiness," the master said. "But if you share it with anyone, you will be kicked out of the temple forever, and never able to return or become a monk."

The boy said he understood, and the master told him the secret. Upon hearing it, the boy ran forth from the temple, into the streets of the city below, and began yelling it to everyone at the top of his lungs.

The other boys who were not chosen were very angry.

"He should not ever have been allowed to be a monk," they said.

But the master just smiled.

"He did not ever need to be," the master said.

So, he gets his life dream, and what does that white mouse do?

Quilah immediately set out to change the unwritten law that wounded and sick mice were put to death. He dragged that ugly issue right out into the open, for all to see, and contested it. In very public places, even on the Murine equivalent of TV. After that, most Murines hated him again, even though he was right. That behavior was really stupid. He tried hard. He didn't care about his reputation, or his job, or getting feces thrown at him wherever he went in public. Some listened, but it was too much change too quickly. They weren't ready for it, even though Hali backed him. Medical facilities aboard ships and bases improved, however, especially with the new technology available. With our help, disease vanished from the planet almost overnight. Radiation could be treated, and wounds could be healed in hours or days.

But The Shunned had made plenty of enemies.

No one ever mentioned Quilah's miracles. The mouse himself did not talk about it. He just wanted to be a normal, contributing member of society. Nothing more. Still, over the weeks, when on occasion the original crew would meet up or run into each other by accident, they treated Quilah with great respect. And if they didn't, Captain Cowboy made them pay.

After a few weeks, it was looking like the hero, Cowboy, was being denied another command. He discussed it with Hali, who remained emotionless the entire time, telling his brother it was just the way of things right now with the war and such. All the building going on, all the change happening so quickly. He promised with a smile to take care of it as soon as something good enough for the hero of Sector Fifteen was available. We watched as Cowboy ranted about the new ships as they came online, and he deserved at least a battle cruiser — even one of the heavy class coming out with the new deflector screens. He flat out demanded that Hali make High Command pull their heads out of their asses and recognize his genius leadership, and give him a ship, dammit! He wanted back into the war yesterday. Hali listened, agreed at every opportunity, and said, "I'll see what I can do." All the while, I could swear, holding back laughter. We didn't get it until later. Meanwhile, Cowboy continued round the clock training at advanced flight school, learning every skill possible a captain should have. He had a lot of catching up to do. He had gone up five ranks overnight, and because he was a planet-wide hero, they let him keep the rank. He enjoyed the training, and excelled at the tests and challenges — especially the wargames and simulation scenarios. He aced them with the skill of a born warrior. His out-of-the-box thinking regularly astounded the instructors and higher-ups. They put many of his solutions into practice, which infuriated him.

He chomped at the bit to get back to the real thing. He became known at the school as Captain “I deserve command” Cowboy, though no one dared say that to his face.

Quilah worked in the new hospitals, always receiving unjust punishments and never receiving his rightful status rewards. Many doctors refused to work with him. Some patients refused his care as well. He ended up working in the labs (an irony I found less than humorous) and doing grunt work for other doctors. He would regularly be dismissed early from work or told not to come in at all. At night, after working a sixteen-hour shift, he would clean up so the janitor mouse could go home to his children. He worked tirelessly, and was grateful for all of it, but they put him at the bottom of the ladder.

His crusade did have some small effect, after a time, though not the one he wanted.

In the new society, it was no longer acceptable to rip mice to shreds when they came in wounded from wartime missions. They were put to sleep mercifully by lethal injections, or shot if wounded during combat. Which, of course, Quilah refused to do. He was suspended, all ranks and privileges withheld as well.

After months of work, his only response was, “Well, it was good while it lasted.” He looked up at me, his constant companion, and smiled.

“Nothing lasts forever,” he said.

