

## CHAPTER 16

### *The Sentinel's Remorse*

We walked back to camp. It only took a few hours, we were so full of energy. We felt like we were walking in the clouds, and had shifted to another dimension where everything was good and well and would stay that way. We smiled and giggled and held hands like little kids.

When we got near the camp, Khelben met us. He was just sitting there by a stream on a large, flat rock looking like one of those old Dore etchings of an angel kicking back in nature. The early morning sun made the water patterns reflect on his dark brown skin.

We stopped. He eventually turned to us in that dramatic way of his.

"So?" I said.

"You weren't just going to walk into camp without the phase cloak, were you?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I guess we were." I giggled some more. "Sorry about that. Good thing you caught it."

We were also buck naked, but that's only a human taboo, apparently.

We felt ourselves shift out of the material world again. It was disappointing. I felt like a disembodied spirit again, and could no longer feel the grass beneath my feet.

"If you need the cloak dropped for any reason, just ask," he said.

"Yeah," I said sadly.

"Did it also occur to you that those bodies aren't actually yours?" he said.

"Hey," I said defensively, "they gave us formula-one hotrods and expect us not to drive them?!"

"Would this have offended the original owners?" Avaril said. "Because it doesn't seem like they're much into jealousy or possessiveness."

"It would not," Khelben agreed. "In fact, I find it interesting that the original owners were also, in fact, lovers. And you two did not know that."

Avaril and I looked at each other.

"So us, being reflections of them, just fell into our higher destiny?" I asked. "Meaning, they felt it so we felt it also?"

"Of sorts," Khelben said. "Free will can change many things. But in the end, you naturally went the same way their hearts did."

My eyes widened. "They were soul mates."

Avaril glanced at me. "Don't make it a big deal."

"Yeah," I said. "Alright." But it *was* a big deal. I'd searched for my soul mate, or whatever that concept meant to me, my whole life. Perhaps to meet her all the way across existence in the bodies of angels. Yeah. My mind would come up with something like that.

"They were, and are," Khelben said. He got to his feet and strode down to the grass. "Quilah and Lily have returned. I will be on the other side of the planet and the two moons for a time, protecting the Murines while they construct a brand new form of anti-matter technology."

"Preventing it from doing damage?" I asked.

"Making sure they don't blow up the planet, yes," he said. "All this technology too soon. It is very dangerous. Technology is the opposite of this," he gestured around him at the perfect harmony of nature. "It's more Zorian than Vasserian. Left to their own devices, this race would likely not make it without us anymore."

I looked back to camp, where with my Vasserian vision I could see Quilah already at work healing needy mice.

"They might," I said.

"The future is not ours to know," Khelben said cryptically. "Not even Vashtarr can see it perfectly. We now do the best we can with the decisions you have made."

"That's all life is," Avaril said. "And decisions must be made."

Khelben said, "I still have not ruled out Zorian influence on Atrax. It's strange that I can't find it, but perhaps another race, close to the Zorians, or influenced by them, has in turn influenced the Atraxians. It feels wrong. I remain on high alert. I suggest you do, too."

"Why don't we go there and turn that planet upside down, and if we find anything even remotely Zorian, sterilize the entire place?" I said.

"Jesus, Jared," Karen said, tessering in.

"No, seriously," I said. "We've sided with the mice. The Atraxians are jacked up, deformed monsters. Khelben can't scan anything evil there in the entire planet? That's just not right. Nuke the site from orbit. It's the only way to be sure."

"Fuckin' A," Avaril said. I smiled.

"I can't scan an entire planet," Khelben said.

We all looked at him.

"What?" I said.

"My powers are still growing, just like yours," he said. "I am not omnipotent. A planet has trillions of atoms to the millionth power. It would take me centuries at my current available concentration level. If I were Rank Three, I could do it in days. Rank Four, in seconds. I've scanned the surface, and there is no obvious Zorian technology. No energy radiation of that sort, no telltale evidence. If there was Zorian influence, it almost always shows in their technology. But their tech level can't begin to approach ours as Vasserians. Our ship alone could destroy their entire fleet and take no damage."

"Then let's do it!" I said. "*Especially* if you can't be sure!"

"Jared," Karen said, getting exasperated, "they are living beings. There is still hope for them. Maybe they're just sick. Maybe it's a virus, or some kind of toxin that can be cured."

"Yeah, maybe a Zorian toxin. Man, we can't mess with that stuff! You didn't see what those things could do. They make the Atrax look like... helpless baby mice. If we let them get the drop on us, we are *so* dead. And then the Murines are too."

"They have sovereign free will," Khelben said. "And there is no evidence. We will *not* do what you suggest. No Alpha Knight ever would."

"But we're *not* Alpha Knights. We're humans! And *this* is what humans would do."

"Precisely why we shouldn't do it," Karen said. "Let's not mess up another planet besides our own."

"None of us want the Murines hurt," Avaril said to me. "Especially Quilah." She smiled. Holy crap. She was getting fast at digging to the heart of the matter.

"There is a term for this," Khelben said. "It is *Sentinel's Remorse*."

I shrugged at him like, *Will you get on with it and stop pausing for effect?*

"It is a phenomenon, common even among Alpha Knights. Usually younger, less experienced ones. Falling in love with, or becoming attached to, the race one is sent to protect. Rarely, even one particular entity. But it never ends well, Jared. We outlive them. Whether we succeed or not, emotions will cloud your judgement and

influence your decisions. You can't decide with clarity if you are biased."

"Well, good thing you're here, then, Stone Man," I said bitterly. "To prevent our emotions from screwing everything up." I stomped the ground. "Man, are all Vasserians Spock without the human side?" Khelben ignored my immaturity.

"Actura was very human," Avaril reminded me.

"Ahhrrrg!" I started walking off. "It's too late now! I'm not letting anything happen to Quilah!"

"You might want to put some clothes on," Karen said after me.

Oh yeah.

I felt Avaril matter manipulate her uniform back into existence behind me, and I did the same without missing a step. I was tempted to make it white or blue instead of green, but I didn't care anymore. Green it was.

I stalked off toward the camp, where the masses were gathered around a center hill. I considered ways of making Quilah immortal. Or invulnerable. Or something. But I knew that even advanced Knights who could do that, like Actura, would refuse to. Vashtarr certainly wouldn't. They'd just let an entire race die because it was the natural way of things. The kings seemed like perfect Taoists. I never understood that religion.

I sat on a hill nearby the central one. Quilah was healing Murines. They were licking him, thanking him, trying to give him things, food, servitude. He accepted none of it. He handed all the gifts of to Lily, who put them aside for other, needy mice. He healed every mouse that came to him. Then, after a time, he began one of his speeches.

"We do not need fear," he said to everyone. "We don't need to be in pain, we don't need to be hungry, or sick. We can choose a different way than all of that. We can make our own destiny. But it requires that we give up old ways that don't work anymore." He gestured down at the sick mice that had come to him for healing, now there listening to him in good health.

"It does not work to kill the wounded," he said. "It doesn't work for some to be poor and others rich. It doesn't work to make war and death. None of this will lead to peace. None of this will lead to happiness. We need to stop fighting."

And here was where he always started losing people. The Murines were all happy to be miraculously healed, but when he started in on this spiel, Murines began leaving. Which was all good and well. The camp couldn't support the hundreds of thousands who were on their way from across the planet. He never lost all of them, but it separated the open minded from those who simply wanted something. In the end, one in ten usually stayed. One in every ten of those usually stayed for a long period of time. Given those ratios, he usually gained one hundred mice a day or more.

"With our technology, we can heal everyone — even the Atrax. Do you think they would try to kill us if they were happy? Anyone who is truly happy only wants to make others happy. Feeling good makes anyone UNmean. And the universe offers it to all! It's free to everyone! It doesn't tell us that some of us can have it and some can't. It doesn't tell us that some of us can have air to breath and some only get a little. The universe is endless, infinite love. And so we are as well, for we are children of the universe. We ARE the universe. It's everything, including us. There is nowhere it is not. We are all one! We are not separate. Not even from the Atrax."

Those who remained, thousands of Murines, loyal followers, echoed their agreement and faith.

Avaril sat down beside me.

"You've done created a mousey Jesus," she said.

I grinned. "He created himself. We just gave him the opportunity to grow into it."

"Khelben thinks it's a mistake to focus on one mouse when we're here to save the species."

"I heard. Khelben thinks a lot of things for a young Vasserian."

"Well, he's off back into space again," she said, "but..." she looked at me meaningfully. "As much as we love Quilah, he might be right."

"No, I feel in my gut this mouse is important. I'm going with my heart, not my head. That's what I do."

"And you're wonderful for it," she said, putting her hand on my arm. "But... The picture is so much bigger here."

I turned to her, eyebrows raised. "And too complicated!" I exclaimed. "Vasserian brains or no, our minds just aren't up to this big of a picture. I choose Quilah. He's my mission."

"We might be here another million years," she said. "Quilah..."

"Oh, give me a break," I said, deflecting what I couldn't hear. "This mission is almost over. The Atrax won't win the war. Not with us here. And this planet will reform, starting with our boy here, and eventually evolve. All we had to do was make sure they survive to get the chance. We've almost done that. We've won, pretty much."

"Karen would say that's when you really need to look out," she said.

"Nah, we're almost done."

"You're just not that stupid," she said, using that sharpness she had to make a point.

I sat still, looking back at Quilah speaking.

"When you have enough, give the rest away," he said. "When you have *anything* good, give it away! No one can keep it in the end. All that isn't given is lost. Don't steal food — give food! Defend the weak. Lift up your poor and sick, and the world will grow its gratitude, its forgiveness. We can *all*, every one of us, be happy. It is achievable. Right now. Right here."

Yeah. I was deeply bothered. I felt guilty for not telling Quilah that their souls were just pinpoints of light, not minds, or hearts, or true spirits. My boy would fade away when he passed on from such a fragile, easily harmed body. And everything he was, all this beauty, all this wisdom, all his experiences... would come to nothing in the end. In just one moment of harm. One stupid moment could end all of this... all of him. His entire race, just living for the moment, reaching for eternity. But too late for Quilah and his friends. I just couldn't handle it. It was the most unfair thing in all existence. My mind rejected it, and retreated in horror.

But that wasn't what Avaril was talking about. And with our link, I knew that. But I couldn't face either one.

"Everything is perfect just as it is," Quilah was going on. "And to us, it is only what we make of it. How we see it. How we remember the experience of a past already gone one second later. Now is all we have. Our stories make us. What we believe about what happened, is our reality. If we believe our past was bad, then it was, regardless of what happened. And if we believe everything is wonderful," he looked down at his wife, who was staring back up at him with eyes overflowing with adoration. "Then it is. That's our story. That's our reality. And our thoughts, our feelings, will respond to that. And the universe will respond to us!" He looked out over the crowd. "Our belief is what we have to work with. We can turn almost any bad thing into a good thing by changing our belief about it. Even the war. Even the Atrax. Even our own fate. This power has no limits. The universe is endless."

The idea of all that gentle beauty ending forever kept bothering me until the end of the day. I sat on that hill, watching the crowd come and go, listening to Quilah tirelessly preaching to his people. Avaril came and went, always coming back to me to spend time at my side. And at the end of the day, when things settled down and dinner was being made (headed by Master Chef Lily), Quilah had visitors.

Eight official shuttlecraft and forty sleek new fighters showed up from the orbital starport. The shuttles were large, streamlined, new-technology ships about one hundred feet long each. Armed to the teeth (pun intended), and marked with high ranking insignias on the bows, the small fleet landed just half mile north of the camp.

Admirals Cowboy and Hali both emerged from the vehicles, with a massive host of heavily armored, armed escorts. Avaril and I stood up. Karen was on watch, but we went down and joined her.

Lily ran up to greet her old friends. She was met by the guards, who she bowled out of the way with enthusiasm. Before they could stun her or arrest her, Cowboy motioned them off. Lily slammed into him and knocked him over into the dirt in his fine, clean uniform. Cowboy was laughing. She licked his face repeatedly

until Hali came into view, and then she repeated the assault. Hali used mousey martial arts to control her affection somewhat, but she still got some licks in.

“Good to see you too, Lily,” he said.

She led them to the house. On the way, I saw them assessing the camp, the situation, clearly surprised at the size of it, the dedication of the followers, and the intensity of the movement. They looked at each other with concern.

Neither of them had forgotten we were there, invisible and watching. They peered about, as if looking for us, knowing we were near.

At the house, fed and given drink, it was only a few minutes before Quilah arrived.

“My friends!” he said cheerfully.

Cowboy and Hali got up and nosed their brother. They sniffed, shared licks, and groomed each other for a minute.

“Your remembered,” Quilah said, smiling sweetly.

“We were there,” Cowboy said. “How could we forget? I took my first day off ever from duty to be here.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Hali said. “But we have a few reason for being here.” He brought out a present, a small box, gift wrapped. “Congratulations on your wedding. All you ever wanted was a family. Now you, along with us, have finally seen your dreams come true.”

“Well, not yet,” Quilah said, “But hopefully!”

Cowboy pulled out a gift as well — a thin tablet. “It’s a sure thing,” he said. “And we are happy for you. Who would ever have guessed we all would get everything we wanted?”

Karen, Avaril, and I sat on one of the low pads that passed for a mouse couch.

“We know you don’t want material possessions,” Hali said. “From hearing you speak time to time.” He grinned. “So these are for both of you, but Lily can be the caretaker of such things.”

Quilah opened the small box with his teeth, as Murines used those tools for just about everything, and found a beautiful ring, four inches in diameter, made of what the Murines called Astrallium. It was a glinting, color-shifting half metal half gemstone that was incredibly rare and fantastically expensive. It was made for a Murine ear. Jewelry was rare among Murines, and only the highest in status wore any. Lily’s eyes got big. They watered up.

Hali put it on her left ear, a symbol of a happy marriage and high status.

I wondered if Quilah would accept it, this symbol of riches and wealth, everything he was preaching the opposite of, but my fears were needless. When he saw how happy it made Lily, he graciously nodded and thanked Hali. Lily resumed licking the High Command officer who was once her brother in a slum. He almost giggled, like when they were kids. Almost.

“And this is also for both of you,” Cowboy said. “I know how you feel about it, but once upon a time, we all agreed to share if we ever got rich. And honestly, money *can* buy some good things. So I hope you’ll take it.” He handed Quilah the tablet.

Quilah’s eyes got large. “Oh, Cowboy!” he said. “That’s a *lot* of money!”

“Don’t give it away,” Cowboy snapped, and handed the tablet to Lily, who read it and clutched it to her chest. “That’s for your sons and daughters someday. It’s enough that you will never want for anything, ever again. None of us will ever be hungry, or thirsty, or tired. None of your children will have to make toys out of rocks. Never again.”

Quilah’s eyes teared up. “Oh, thank you, gentle friends. I am so grateful for you.”

“Happy birthday, buddy,” Hali said.

“Yes, happy birthday,” Cowboy said. They both bowed their noses to Quilah.

My eyebrows shot up.



"Birthday!" I said.

Quilah looked at me. "Yes, my birthday."

Hali didn't react, but Cowboy frowned a little upon the evidence that we were still there.

"How old are you?!" I said.

Quilah giggled. "Silly," he said.

"Silly," Lily echoed.

I looked around at Karen and Avaril, who were looking at each other with strange expressions on their faces. Worried.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"My birthday," Quilah chirped happily.

"Right," I said. "How old are you? Gotta be like, thirteen-ish by now or something, right?"

Quilah stared at me as if I was the child.

"I'm many weeks, Jared. Even months. Today is my birthday. I'm one!"

"One..." I said slowly. "One... what? One year?"

"Yes!" he said, smiling. "I made it!"

I paused. Had it been a whole year? One rotation of their planet around their star. About the same as one Earth year. I guess it had. It went by so fast.

"Oh," I said. "Alright, awesome! Yeah, you made it! Happy birthday, buddy!" I made a motion as if raising a glass. "To many more!"

Quilah looked confused. Out of old habit, he relayed my words to the others.

"He wishes us many more birthdays," he said at the end, gently smiling.

Cowboy laughed. Hali immediately understood my mistake. And then I realized Avaril and Karen already had.

Avaril put her arms around me from behind and whispered in my ear.

"He's fifty-one by our standards, Jared."

I felt a shock explode in my chest and run down my arms and legs to my fingers and toes.

"We made it," Quilah said. "We're all over one now. Who woulda thought?"

I stood there dumbfounded. Staring.

"Lily here might make it to two," Cowboy said. "But let's not hold our breath. Who would ever want to be that old?"

I stared. Quilah understood at last.

"Oh," he said, shuffling to me, looking up at me. "You didn't know."

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Jared," he said. "It must be hard for you to understand. You said humans live to eighty sometimes. And Vasserians, forever. Murines can live to eighty sometimes."

"Eighty weeks," Hali said soberly.

I was speaking to nobody. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"We didn't realize you didn't know until recently," Avaril said kindly. "Then we didn't know how to break it to you. You're really attached to him."

I knelt down in front of my friend.

"Khelben. Cloak off. Now."

We faded into reality. The mice all saw us. I felt the floor under my feet, felt the heat of the fireplace on my face. My eyes were getting blurry with glowing tears.

"Quilah," I said.

He looked back at me with sympathy. Even Cowboy looked sympathetic.

I saw him for the first time with new eyes. I saw it in his face. He was older. Much older. He wasn't a child, as when we had met him, or an adolescent, or even a young adult. His fur was long and split. His ears had wrinkles. The bones showed in his feet, paws, and tail. His white fur, once so shiny, now had a slight yellowish cast to it. His eyes were not as ruby bright as they had once been. And I had overlooked all of it.

They had grown to full size in weeks.

They could build starships in days.

They learned one hundred times faster than humans.

All the children they could have, so often.

Everything made sense now.

Because their lifespan had never changed from the mice I knew. Mother nature *did* have a way of controlling their population.

Earth mice in the wild only lived, at best, two human years. Most never reached two.

This was his only birthday.

I was such a complete idiot.

I wrapped my arms around him and buried myself in his beautiful fur, smelled his scents, felt his feelings. He felt like love. Nothing else. Only love.

"Oh, God, my friend!" I said. I wept. My boy's life was half over. All this time I had thought it was just beginning.

Out of respect, most of the others left the room, and went out onto the deck, leaving Quilah and I with Lily, who didn't know what to do, so just sat there looking unsure.

"I thought you knew," Quilah said. "I'm sorry, Jared."

"M... me too!" I sobbed.

"It changes nothing," he said. "You've given us all fantastic, amazing lives. Even Cowboy has to admit that. Without you, none of us would have ever had a chance!" He licked me, and gingerly groomed the back of my neck with his teeth.

"It all happened so, SO fast!" I said.

"And we are so, so grateful," he said, and placed his head next to mine. His tail wrapped around my feet. He returned the embrace, even though Murines didn't use that human gesture.

"I don't want to lose you," I said. "You're my best friend."

I felt him glow with compassion.

"You're mine too, Jared." He brushed his whiskers up against my cheek. "Mine too."

A moment of sacred silence followed. I felt my connection with him — his beautiful heart. He didn't need to open up to me. He had never been closed to anyone or anything. There was no one in the world like him. His soul...

"It's okay," Lily said finally, very softly. She crawled over and put her nose on us both. "Everything will be okay."

My glowing tears ran down Quilah's soft fur like pearl rain. He held me and smiled.

I was the child now. I probably always had been.





