

## CHAPTER 17

### *Punishment for a Healing*

The party went on, despite my drama. Good times were shared by the old friends. They ate good food, had sweet drinks, laughed, played games, and enjoyed each other like the old days. They even played a new version of their old starship battle game, but this time the boxed game came with small metal starships of dozens of classes, complex rules, a 3-D map and dice. Hali had, on his ridiculously rare spare time, written it up and published it. It was a bestseller. Cowboy praised it, saying it would teach children at a young age the art of naval warfare. Now that our bodies were back on the material plane, we all played it, and after several long hours, by what appeared to be random luck of the dice, Lily won.

"That's okay," she said gleefully. Hali was aghast at losing his own game. Again. Cowboy laughed so hard he hit the floor.

We spent the entire evening with our mice. Cowboy even thanked us for saving the *Quick Tooth*, and admitted that they had needed our help. Finally. I laughed and almost slapped him on the back, but his tail rattled and I thought better of it.

In the wee hours of the morning, Quilah finally bid everyone a good night, and headed to join Lily in their nest.

"There was one other thing," Hali said.

"Two other things," Cowboy said.

Quilah turned at the stairs. Hali stood up.

Cowboy nodded to Hali. *You go first.*

"Murine Methelor, the high post of the world government, has fallen ill," Hali said. "It is a new version of Mycoplasma. We haven't a cure. It may be a weapon from the Atrax, it may not, but either way, his case is hopeless. While he is not a fair leader, his replacement is worse, and he has experience with the war. On my authority, risking a great deal, I am asking you to come heal him. Before it can spread."

Quilah thought for a moment. Then he nodded. "I will come."

Hali nodded in respect, then stepped back one step.

Cowboy stepped forward a foot.

"Quilah, you've made quite a noise, visiting the whole world, healing everyone, teaching peace." He seemed uncomfortable. "You've frightened many, no fault of your own, I know... And millions of Murines are refusing to join the war effort now, for the first time in history. You've challenged the status quo. And put up a decent fight. But whether or not it changes, and how much damage is done in the process, I need to tell you a story." He paused and gathered his thoughts.

"Long ago, Atrax and Murines were one species. You know this, but what you don't know is why they separated."

"Even before they became different genetically," Hali picked up the story, "they began to take different views on things. One thing, in particular." So they had rehearsed this together. They must have considered it important enough to bring it up at their brother's birthday/wedding party.

“There were two sects,” Cowboy said. “One group of Murines who wanted to build, grow, and create new things. And one who wanted to eradicate all the predators on the planet, hunt, and practice violence.”

“Obviously, some of each spilled over into the other,” Hali said. “The lines weren’t clearly drawn then. But over time, eventually, they almost came to a civil war. Their values and beliefs became too separate. Finally, they couldn’t see each other’s points of view any longer.” He stood up and gestured with his hands. “The Murines you know here on Muscila were the builders, the thinkers, the more peaceful version.” His hands came apart, distancing from each other. “But the others, those now known as the Atrax, were the hunters, the killers, the ones who believed that violence was inevitable in all of life.”

“Rather than kill themselves in civil war,” Cowboy said, “and it came very close — they agreed to separate. The Murines who would become the Atrax were forced out by the majority who wanted to stay and pursue peaceful coexistence without consuming the environment. The Atrax left the planet as soon as the technology was available, and headed out into space, and were not heard from again for 8,000 years.”

“But it was that rift in morals that caused the split,” Hali said. “And we all were lucky that they agreed to leave rather than fight it out over territory. Otherwise, we might all be Atraxians today.”

Cowboy now stood. “To be direct, Quilah, your speeches, your teachings, your advice... Are recreating that same rift among us here on Muscila. Half of us now want peace, where before, all of us wanted to defend ourselves. We are divided. And it’s your doing.”

Quilah took it in stride, nodding. He had thought of it. He pursed his lips and looked down in thought.

“What would you have me do?” he said. “I won’t stop trying my best to make the world a better place. And I don’t believe war is the answer.”

“I know,” Hali said. “We discussed it. We have an idea.”

Cowboy said, “The defense has been a success. We are holding our own now with our new fleet, and clearing a path through occupied space to Atrax itself. I am asking you to resume active duty, Quilah. As chief medical officer aboard the battleship *Bright*.”

Quilah raised his eyebrows.

“Before you refuse,” Cowboy said, “think of what it means. Shunned is no longer a legal term, but it is still a common practice. This is a chance to stand up for our kind — what we used to be — and prove that we can not only hold our own in society, but rise to the top. Your active re-enlistment would inspire millions, and show that you are not anti-military. You could continue your teachings from the flagship of the fleet. Hali can arrange to have them broadcasted. You would be able to heal anyone, and have the power to repeal the wounded-death law. Hali and I will commit to helping that happen.”

Quilah was silent.

“You would reach those who are against your teachings by joining their side,” Hali said. “No one would know what side you stand on, except that you stand for Murines as a whole.”

“It would unite us again,” Cowboy said. “Whether or not Murines joined up. It would prove you are for peace, not against anything, even the need to defend ourselves. And we *do* have the need, Quilah. If we do not stand up and fight, the Atrax are going to run us over. Your words will not sway them.”

Quilah seemed unsure of that. But I was sure as hell. No way was I going to take my boy to Atrax while he preached to demons. And I was fairly certain he *would* go do that. Even all four of us might not be able to protect him then, And wasn’t that just the perfect ending for a messiah? Go preach to the enemy and they end him. Martyr. Very 2,150 AD.

“You would not have to fight,” Hali said. “We have the power to exempt you. You would be there to inspire and to heal. All we ask is that you join willingly, and not actively discourage the effort once there. This massive offensive will likely be the end of the war. There will be much restoration to do, and you will be at the head of that movement. You will be able to change things. For the better. Permanently. The government won’t be able to

stop you by then.”

“There’s more,” Cowboy said. He had come to the table armed with more than one strategy, of course. He came right up to Quilah. “I found our mother.”

Quilah gasped out loud. Cowboy smiled.

“She joined up when the Shunned law was repealed. She followed your example, Quilah. She now serves aboard the *Bright*. As a medical officer. And she is eager to see you again.”

Still, Quilah did not answer.

“This is going to be a massive-scale assault,” Cowboy said. “Think of all the people you could help.”

Quilah knew he was being manipulated. He didn’t seem to care. Finally he looked down into Cowboy’s eyes. And held that stare for the first time in their lives. Cowboy’s tail actually dropped an inch, along with my jaw.

“I will think on it,” Quilah said.

Cowboy knew that was the best he was going to get. He nodded, smiling, and stepped back.

Then we went upstairs to bed. Cowboy departed, while Hali stayed the night. It was customary in Murine culture when guests came to all sleep together in a huge pile. Like our team had done when they were children. We joined them. It was like sleeping in a huge bed of furry, warm pillows. It felt wonderful. Quilah’s head rested next to mine all night, and we dreamed together.

We Vasserians recloaked before dawn came. We had our time out of our cage of invisibility. I went out into the cold dawn, my warm body leaving a steam trail in the air that nobody could see. I watched the sunrise with Avaril on our hill from yesterday.

We didn’t say much.

Quilah did go to save the high post — their version of a president or a king. He recovered, and was stupefied by the miracle. Stupefied, and obviously fearful of the implications. Karen, Avaril, and I looked at each other, no telepathy needed. That was trouble. But Quilah had known it going in. He wasn’t a fool. Hali had known also, and had deemed the risk necessary. Though I suspected the genius had something more in mind. He was always seven steps ahead of everyone else.

Still, that look on the high post’s face. I had that urge to remove him from the gene pool on the spot just to be sure. That old mouse had not believed in Quilah until it hit him personally. Now his belief system was shaken. He was given a rude awakening to what real power might do. How he might react now was anyone’s guess.

Regardless, it had been a fairly public healing, with all the post’s chancellors and seneschals present. Word got out. Because mice do that. The last barrier to Quilah’s reputation had fallen. No one doubted him now.

After that, Murines from all walks of life, from every position and status, began to visit Quilah at his camp. They renamed the city Quilah, and tried to make him owner of all the land for a hundred-mile radius. He turned the rights over to the citizens of the city. Now they all became land owners, with rights to farm and hunt as they wished.

They tried to give him the rank of a duke, a mighty title on their planet. Again, he politely refused, asking instead that every Murine on the planet be given the title instead. He told them the technology existed to make sure all the wealth and abundance went with it for each and every single member of their society. *If* they wouldn’t use it on war.

Though he and Lily were now officially billionaires, they changed nothing about the way they did things. They gave away money like it was rice. They built schools and hospitals. They gave to anyone who asked.

Lily wore her ear ring, though, with pride and pleasure. She had apparently always dreamed of having a piece of jewelry someday, though she never guessed it would be so nice. She was very fond of it, and always asked if it made her look pretty.

Quilah would tell her that nothing could ever make her look less than the most beautiful girl in the world.

Then he would add, “You make the ring look very shiny.” Shiny was a fine word to a Murine. An exceptionally fine word. That always made her very happy, and never failed to broaden her smile. She never tired of it.

Four weeks passed while the Murines ramped up for the assault on Atrax. They built, prepped, loaded, and repaired at superhuman speed. I saw them with new understanding. They did things so fast because they had to. Because they lived human months in a single day. When you only got one birthday, every minute mattered.

Time now mattered to me as well. Overnight, it was my most valuable asset. I had no idea how much of it I had left with Quilah. And for all my abilities, I could never get more. The mouse himself felt bad for me, but he accepted it with grace as usual. We kept our time together, now sacred, and played in the clouds at every opportunity. We held long, deep conversations, and sealed our bond without reluctance. He was the best friend I ever had. We just... got each other, like magic, and accepted it all unconditionally. I had never had such a friend back home.

Avaril spent time with us, but also understood. She and I had all the time in the world. Maybe eternity, if we never woke. Our relationship stayed where it had been, and for now, that was alright. I saw my relationship with Quilah as a rapid, brightly burning candle. Intense, profound, and getting shorter every day. He didn’t see it that way. He seemed to think that eternity might exist somewhere, and that in that place, we would always find each other. I had to turn my head away when he said things like that.

I went to Khelben repeatedly to dig for solutions, but there were none to be had. When his body gave out, there would never be another Quilah Laoshu. His tiny candle flame spirit would go wherever the others went, and fade from existence. Khelben was respectfully silent about it. He had told me spiritual evolution took billions of years. I hadn’t known the ramifications of it then. I hadn’t known I would meet a soul that I would give anything to see go on.

But it was not in my power. So I stayed quiet, and tried to only smile and laugh when I was with him.

Around us, the war effort cranked forward, building in strength and size every day.

We Knights hoped this would be the end of things. The war would be over. Maybe the Atrax would even surrender. We could relax. We could hope, but Karen told us this was when we needed to be on our most high guard. Like Khelben.

When asked if it was clairvoyance, she replied, “Of course not. In all the movies, when everything’s going great — that’s when it suddenly goes to hell.”

“This isn’t the movies,” I said. Karen had called it. She was damn wise.

“Nobody ever listens,” she said, as she threw her gold hands up and tessered away to some other task.

So we tried to listen. We boosted the tech again. We made “modifications” to the array of weapon satellites and bases around the planet. We checked on Khelben at Base Asteroid. We even made a run and checked on the space between the star systems. We snuck a peek at Atrax itself. Aside from a few skirmishes, both navies remained at home base, though the Atraxian fleet was one hundred times larger. All seemed calm once I resisted the urge to start smashing ships with TK. Everything appeared to be serene. Nothing going on.

But Karen was always right, and this time more than ever.

A few things happened at the same time. We were learning as Vasserians that nothing happened that way by accident. Alpha Knights were like super-scientists with IQs of millions — and still they believed in higher powers and fate. There was something going on that even the oldest race in existence could not figure out. We experienced that serendipity in what came next. And that, really, was the end of our season in the sun.

It’s okay.

Nothing lasts forever.

I know, dammit. I know.

I went kicking and screaming into it anyway.

The day came. The Atrax Assault Fleet, led by the battleship *Bright*, was stocked, loaded, and ready to leave. There were 800 ships in all. The biggest fleet in Murine history by far. Twelve supercarriers, four battleships under the *Bright*, and sixty heavy battle cruisers. Hundreds of regular battle cruisers and destroyers. Over 1,200 fighters. Supply ships, missile frigates, fast assault cruisers, the list went on. It was an impressive force. Cowboy was given a promotion to Fleet Admiral. He was to lead the attack. The crowd to see them off numbered in the millions. It was broadcast on every channel. Every non-military ship stood at formation, both on the ground and in space to honor those going to battle.

And Quilah showed up on launch day, in uniform. It was his old uniform, but the only one he had.

Lily was there to see him off, along with thousands of his followers. Cowboy met him at the launching dock of Starport Station One in the heart of former Dathriim, now known as Quilah City.

Cowboy did not look pleased.

"I'm afraid you cannot come with us," the Fleet Admiral said sadly.

"Oh?" Quilah said, surprised.

"The high posts — all of them, especially the highest, whom you healed," Cowboy said, aware he was on worldwide TV, "has refused your reenlistment. I'm sorry, Quilah. They were adamant about it."

The crowd became very silent. A long moment passed.

"I wish to go anyway," Quilah said firmly. That's my boy.

Cowboy raised one greying eyebrow. He glanced out into the air, seemingly at nothing, and not moving from his stiff stance, he simply shrugged.

"Okay," Cowboy said. "Welcome aboard, Rear Admiral Quilah. As the highest ranking military Murine, I place you in charge of the entire fleet's medical resources on my own authority." And he stepped aside to allow Quilah entry to the ramp leading to the *Bright*. He saluted Quilah, who smiled sheepishly and saluted back.

Well, that did it. All hell broke loose.

There were calls of "Treason!" and "It's a coup!" The crowd broke into fights. Military police swarmed everywhere. Sirens went off. Some ships went on Red Alert.

Within seconds, troops descended in hovercraft to block the ramp, and the exit.

Cowboy looked angry, but calmly, dangerously so. He was ready for this.

"Step aside, soldiers," he said. His voice carried over all the chaos.

"We're sorry, Sir!" a lieutenant commander said. "Orders are from the high posts themselves!"

"The military takes its orders from the High Command," Cowboy said. "The government has no right to override them."

"Orders, Sir!" the mouse said. Hundreds of others were taking up positions on railings, buildings, ramps, and atop nearby ships. Up at the gateway into the *Bright*, Cowboy's XO, Captain Murismie, put his hand on his pistol and looked to his commander for orders. Thousands of mice lined the edges of the battleship *Bright*, weapons ready to enforce their admiral's orders.

"*Holy shit*," I sent. "*They're about to go to civil war!*"

The tension was like standing in flaming molasses. Tens of thousands of weapons were leveled at Quilah and Cowboy. Within minutes, the entire dock had no free space. The drumming of rattling tails was deafening. Ears were back. Eyes squinted. Fur bristled.

A transport entered the starport at full speed and had to hover to drop off its passenger. Hali jumped fifty feet down to the loading dock.

"Stop this at once!" bellowed the high commander of High Command. His own mice began filing off of more ships entering the starport gates. They were wearing fully powered battledress armor and carried massive portable plasma cannons.

Then the giant monitors all around the port came on.







Murine Methelor, the high post of the government, was on the TV. All the TVs, every channel.

“High Commander,” he said. “Fleet Admiral. Place this Murine under arrest for attempting to board a military vessel without rank.”

And at that moment, we all felt something terrible. Far out in space, we felt Khelben suddenly experience alarm. Karen linked in with our help. It finally caused that panic reaction in my Vasserian body. It felt like someone had hit me in the gut with a taser.

“This Murine is a military veteran with suspended rank, Sire,” Cowboy said. “I reinstated him as chief medical officer of the fleet.”

A single Atraxian heavy battleship had jumped into the system and was headed over the asteroid belt.

“I am aware of that, Admiral,” the high post said. “I am revoking his status. He is Shunned. Arrest him.”

The ship was solid black. Not gray with stripes. Jet black. And it glowed black. I know that sounds strange, but we saw it through Khelben’s eyes. It was horrible. Massive, heavily armored, and moving quickly.

“That title was removed by law!” Hali said to the enormous room, but he aimed his gaze at the monitor.

Khelben jumped into the *Tooth of Earth* and brought up her power in a heartbeat. He moved to intercept the single dark ship.

“It has been reinstated, that law revoked,” high post said. “And as such, this Murine is trespassing and attempting a criminal act. Arrest him, or be removed from office. Both of you!”

Well. Mice weren’t so different from men. Typical government crap. And after Quilah healed the guy, even.

Khelben brought weapons online. He raised shields to their highest level. He pulled up his psycho prism. He was worried. We all felt it. It scared the shit out of us in an already-tense situation.

Cowboy stood straight up, tall as he could, nose in the air. Hali, after a moment of thought and a glance at his friends, did the same.

“With all due respect, Sire,” Cowboy said, “we refuse.”

You could hear a pin drop.

Khelben placed himself in between the oncoming dark behemoth and the planet and dropped the ship’s cloak.

“Attention Atraxian vessel!” he broadcast in his most threatening voice. “Stand down or you will force me to destr—”

The Atraxian ship pulsed once, and a burning beam of jet black energy shot forth from its bow, striking Khelben’s ship square, ignoring its Vasserian shields, cutting the *Tooth of Earth* clean in half, and striking Khelben in the chest just as he summoned his personal armor.

The signal stopped cold.

“*Holy fucking shit!*” I sent.

“Oh, my God,” Karen exclaimed.

Avaril got that look on her face. The look her higher self, Aquilarr had. She knew we were in the serious shit now. Her stance changed. She was ready for anything. Our alpha senses went into high gear. But space was cut off to us. Our view of the battle ended when Khelben stopped transmitting.

“Then you are considered traitors to the nation of Muscila, and are all under arrest,” the high post said.

Cowboy’s XO drew his pistol. Hali’s mice formed a circle around their high commander. But even with all those mice, they were outnumbered one hundred to one.

It was hopeless.

“It’s pointless to go down fighting!” Quilah shouted out. “There is no enemy here!” He held his hands up high. “I surrender!”

Hali realized the odds. He knew there was no way out. He raised his hands as well. Was he... smirking?

Cowboy wanted, for sure, to go down fighting. We could see it in his eyes. It took all the self-restraint he had

to not give the order to fire. His teeth ground together so loudly we could hear it from hundreds of feet away.

But he raised his hands.

“Stand down,” he ordered his mice.

Guns lowered. The three were seized, restrained, and brought up to a high platform above the rest of the starport.

“*What the hell do we do?!*” I asked my team. They were speechless. I could see their sharp minds thinking of ways to solve this. Without knowing what happened to Khelben, we came up with nothing. Nothing safe, anyway.

Our three friends were lined up above for all to see. The monitors were filled with their images.

“As High Post of Muscila,” the high post said, “I offer absolution to the High Commander and the Fleet Admiral. Stand aside, gentlemice. Do your jobs, serve the community, and all is forgiven. This Shunned, malformed Murine has spread dangerous policies to hundreds of thousands of our population and as such, is a traitor to our long-standing ways.”

“Ways that no longer work for us,” Quilah shouted.

“Gentlemice?” the high post said.

Hali pursed his lips. He let his head down a bit, but looked at Cowboy. Cowboy returned the *what now* glance.

“Nothing lasts forever,” Cowboy whispered.

“No,” Quilah said to his friends. “Don’t do this for me. Stand aside. I don’t want you to suffer for me. It’s not what I want.” He leaned in and looked into Cowboy’s eyes. “Please!”

In that moment, stripped of all their accomplishments, I saw the three young boys from the ghetto standing there. Each other was all they had. It wasn’t lost on them. They were right back to their beginning — everything they had worked so hard for lost within fifteen minutes.

Cowboy wasn’t going to do it. He was going to resist to the end and stand by his friend. But Hali looked into Quilah’s face. Quilah looked back. It was possible they shared a moment of telepathy right then.

“Okay,” Hali said. “As you wish. Cowboy. Give our brother what he wants.”

Hali stepped aside.

Cowboy ground his teeth madly, but he made his legs move him aside.

Quilah stood alone, his back against the concrete wall of the starport. He looked small and frightened again, like he did when I first met him.

But he lifted his chin anyways.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself. Shunned? How do you answer the charges?” the high post asked.

Quilah looked on the verge of a panic attack. Then he closed his eyes. He slowed his breathing. His tail stopped moving. And finally, he opened his eyes again. They were calm and bright. He said nothing.

“Are you the Murine who has been spreading word of accepting our enemies, of not fighting back, of sharing food, and allowing the weak to survive?” the high post demanded.

“I am,” Quilah said.

“You do not deny it?” the high post asked. “Telling citizens to disobey the law?”

“It is as you say,” Quilah said.

A silence followed. Quilah’s followers shouted objections, but they were silenced by violent force.

“Why do you do these things,” the high post said, “when they cause the destruction of our society?”

“If everyone practices them,” Quilah said, “it will save our society. But as it stands now, it is not savable. We must change or perish.”

The high post looked angry.

“I have heard enough. There is no reasoning with you. You have become mad. As such, it is within my power



to order your end. Officers, form a firing squad. I condemn the Murine known as Quilah Laoshu to death.”

Well that was it for me, and I could tell for the others, too. The firing squad lined up, sat up, and aimed.

We tessered up to the platform, in front of Quilah, ready to deflect any harm.

There was a screeching, horrible, earth-shattering noise. It sounded like a deafening version of an incoming missile breaking the atmosphere. The entire starport shook. Windows blew out. Debris fell everywhere. Standing mice fell to all fours. Alarms went silent as the power went out and we were plunged into almost complete darkness.

Then the ground *really* shook. A massive explosion ruptured the east wall, and tore out the supports. The sound was like the loudest crack of thunder I had ever — or would ever — hear. I shielded everyone inside with all the TK I could summon.

Through the ruined wall, the mountain range to the east of camp — the one *past* where Avaril and I had been, was blasted into a giant crater, miles across. A contrail of glittering energy led from past orbit down to the shattered mountains. A titanic mushroom cloud was rising rapidly into the troposphere. It was a beautiful amber-orange color. The shockwave had crippled the city.

Our ship had gone down.

Khelben’s cloak over us flickered out like a candle.

We were exposed for all to see.

