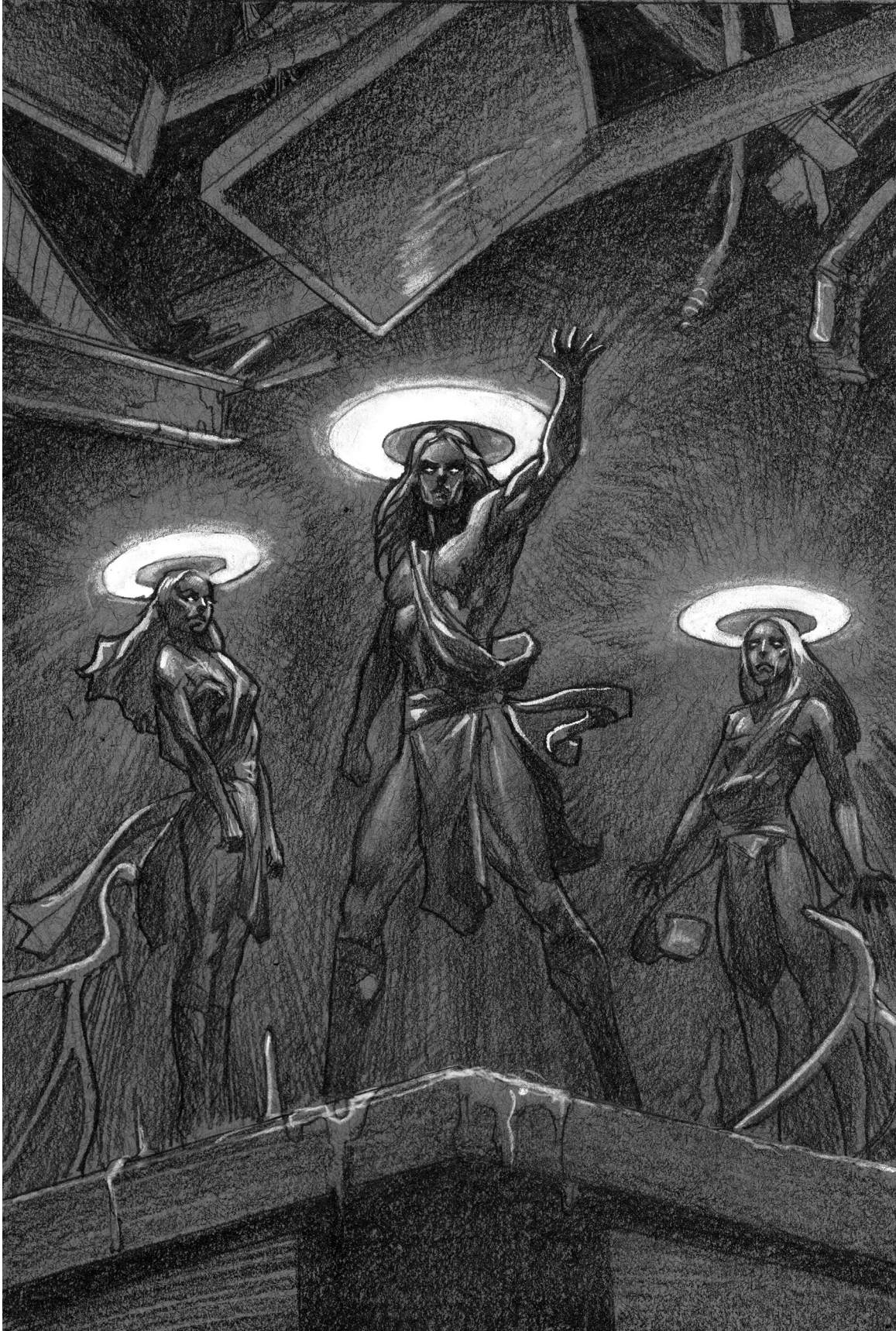


CHAPTER 18

Beholden



In the dark, our glowing bodies stood out like bonfires. Our eyes were iridescent disks. The colors of our skin and hair brighter than anything in the room. The shockwave took sixty seconds to echo into the distance. Outside, we heard sirens, alarms, and horns. The city had been blown over like a house of cards. Quilah looked out toward his camp, anguish streaked across his white face.

We froze there for one incredibly tense moment. I couldn't help but picture it as a comedy, it was so bizarre. I held in my insane laughter. Millions of mice, crowded into a room the size of a city itself, loaded with starships, and us at the top ramp, suddenly caught with our breeches down.

I pulled it together first, actually. Only one thing occurred to me to do, so, as crazy as it was, I did it. I strode forward three steps to the edge of the platform.

Quilah, Cowboy, and Hali must have known what I was going to do. They looked away and closed their eyes.

I brought up my psycho prism. My countenance lit up like one of the angels from the bible. The nearest mice, the firing squad, screamed and fell — some off the ramp — clutching their eyes. All within one hundred yards went blind. Most of them within a quarter mile pissed and shat themselves. So powerful was the pure aspect of an Alpha Knight's manifested being, no normal living thing could stand against it. The entire stardock cried out and covered their eyes, fell to their bellies, cringed, ran, dropped their weapons. They stood no chance. Even their noses were overwhelmed by the light in every spectrum. Lily, far down in the crowd, was the only one who looked away and stood her ground calmly.

The metal railing melted before me.

"Muscilans!" I held out a high, open hand ominously, fingers pointing up over the horizon... remembering a pose from a comic book once. I amplified my voice.

"Quilah Laoshu is under OUR protection! All that he does, he does for the good of your race! Any who oppose him, oppose US!"

You remember Quilah's first reaction to us, right? These mice didn't do as well. They *freaked out*.

I heard thousands of cries of "Takers!" as mice bounced, hopped, bolted, spun, dodged, and panicked in every direction. Mass chaos was immediate. Guns fired. Grenades were thrown, heedless of the harm. Starships armed their turrets. The battleship *Bright* charged theirs in response.

Karen, having played fantasy role playing games, realized my tactic — and realized it was a done deal. The jig was up. She lit up her prism and stepped up to my left.

"We mean you no harm!" she boomed. "We are here to save you!" She shielded as many mice as she could from their own weapons.

Avaril stepped up, her psycho prism firing up around her head as well. Her TK joined ours to protect as many as possible. But if those ship guns fired, everyone in the starport was going to die, possibly even us.

"Do not panic!" she said.

Wow. Way too late for that.

The high post was shocked into silence for a moment. But he was watching this on a TV. He was spared the direct effects.

"Kill them!" he ordered. "Kill the Takers! Kill them with everything in your power!"

Some mice obeyed and fired. It was going to get nasty really quick. We couldn't stave off a million armed mice for long. Our shields were taking hits. The ships had yet to fire, realizing such action would be final for every exposed Murine in the starport. But any second now, they would. The Atraxian invasion would end here on home ground before it ever begun.

"They aren't Takers!" Quilah shouted. When his voice was immediately drowned out by the din, he looked at me. I nodded.

"They aren't Takers!" he boomed with a new, amplified voice. "These are The Beholden!!"

Slowly, mice stopped firing.

“KILL.... THEM!” the high post commanded.

But Quilah persisted. “The light! The golden light from the sky! Remember the stories? These are NOT takers! These ARE the Beholden! Returned to us in time of need! Listen to them!”

High post mouse wouldn’t shut up. The room, maybe the world, was in danger of civil war. So I turned to him. I pointed an ominous finger, like Khelben used to.

“You, Sir, are removed from office!” I shouted.

“Taker, who are *you* to...” he began.

And then Avaril linked with us, and requested our power — our combined concentration that she might use it. We gave it to her, and she tessered the high post from his office, 12,000 miles away, to right in front of us on the platform.

The room stopped fighting.

The high post was frozen in terror. Eyes bugged, ears back, shivering in the sudden cold, clutching his cloak about him, hunched over.

Quilah stepped quickly forward to where the rail used to be on the edge of the platform.

“Beholden!” he said. “NOT Takers!”

The room fell into a slow, hushed quiet.

“They could have killed us all by now, but they came here to protect us from our own extinction!” He turned briefly to the high post. “Everything I have been telling you is true! These beings have been with me all along.”

Cowboy slapped his paw into his face. Hali stayed still, watching it unfold, like he expected it. And maybe he had. I saw it in him. He knew this was going to happen.

Holy crap, I’d been played by that mouse. He had maneuvered us into exposing ourselves.

He hadn’t planned on the ship being punched out of space, but regardless, we would have had to do this. It was the only way to save Quilah. And he knew we would. He knew the high post would panic and arrest the healer. He knew the government couldn’t let Quilah live. He knew all along, and he had decided it was past time for us to be visible to everyone. And once that happened, he knew the government would lose all its power. He and Cowboy... and Quilah... would be in charge. His plan had worked smoothly, even despite unforeseen events. Holy crap. Hali had single-handedly taken over the planet in a half hour. Using us as chess pieces. We exchanged glances, though his eyes were closed, he turned in my direction. *I see you, you clever son of a bitch*, I thought.

He nodded, as if confirming the whole thing. We had a moment of connection, and I had to concede. He had outsmarted us all.

Alright then.

I was planning on what to say when the air-raid sirens went off. They were far louder than all the other klaxons in the city.

“Report!” Cowboy yelled down to his XO.

A minute on the intercom and Murismie replied, “Admiral, the planet is under attack. Moonbase Three has been completely destroyed.”

“On monitors!” Cowboy ordered.

So we all saw it. The giant black Atraxian battleship with its new, deadly weapon. It was cruising over the second moon, carving chunks out of it. A single, sweeping black beam went through everything it touched. Nothing could block it. The ship was casually flying by the moons, annihilating everything it could target with ease. Four cities and two starbases were already casualties. The stygian war machine was headed for the planet.

All the Murines watched the monitor in stark horror for a few seconds, then Cowboy looked at me.

“Go!” I said.

“All crews to ships!” he yelled. I amplified his voice a little too much. “Battle stations! Launch fighters, fire

missiles! Activate every defense satellite we have!” He jumped from the platform hundreds of feet to the loading ramp leading to the battleship *Bright*. I caught him with TK. He knew I would. He paused at the door into the ship next to his XO. “MOVE IT, MICE!” he screamed.

The entire starport all fell into his command and moved like lightning to obey. Within seconds, ships were beginning to rise.

Quilah looked at us. Then down at Cowboy. Then out toward camp.

“Murines need healing in both directions, Quilah,” Avaril said. “Make a choice.”

“Camp,” he said.

Avaril tessered him and Lily out to camp.

Within minutes, the decks were empty and the ships were launching. Given dire purpose, the Murines pulled it together. We were left on the high, unstable, platform with the high post and Hali.

“Please send us to High Command immediately,” Hali asked us. “We can discuss details later.” He looked at the high post. “Sir, you are under arrest for personally revoking elected law.” The old high post sunk down and gave up, utterly defeated. Against gods, he had no choice and he knew it.

Avaril nodded and with our link tessered both mice to High Command, also thousands of miles away.

We immediately left the ground, flying at top speed for the crater. Yeah, we might have tessered, but we didn’t know what to expect once we got there. A careful approach, only seconds longer, was the best bet.

On the way we passed over the camp. We were going about mach twenty, but we saw it all. There were a lot of wounded mice. Quilah was already at work. Tents and makeshift houses had blown over, but most of the mice had dug their nests in the ground. The shockwave had been blocked largely by the first range of mountains closest to the city, as the camp was at their base, but plenty of damage had been done.

And honestly, Khelben had probably been aiming for close to us, needing help and trying to warn us. He probably landed right where he intended to. We hoped.

The ship was in pieces. Its main hull was buried like a titling Stonehenge rock most of the way into the bedrock of the continental plate. The ground around the crater was fused to glass. Some of it was still molten rock. The cloud had risen into the stratosphere. Wayward, jagged energy was crackling everywhere. Multicolored lightning joined the sky to the ground miles apart. It smelled like burned ozone.

Khelben was laying there, two miles from the crash, missing an arm, an eye, everything else broken, ribs exposed, armor shredded, with orange crystal shrapnel embedded in almost every part of his body including his skull. Glowing golden-white blood had formed a boiling puddle around him. Almost a small lake.

If he wasn’t dead, he was really messed up.

None of us could matter manipulate that. He wasn’t within range of our powers.

We tessered him to Quilah. Right in front of him, replacing the piles of mice trying to reach him, whom we tessered aside out of necessity. Us being visible, the mice backed off immediately. Most of these Murines hadn’t been watching TV. This was their first introduction to us.

“Save him,” I asked my friend.

Quilah went to work at once, though touching Khelben burned his skin. We smelled charred hair as he kept his hands on the Alpha Knight. Quilah’s serene trance never shifted. Within seconds, Khelben was restored. Minus an arm and an eye.

“Dark energy,” he croaked.

“Don’t pass out!” Karen pleaded. “We need you awake.”

“Used... Almost all of my power,” he said. “Very little left.” He was halfway in this world, and halfway somewhere else. The damage hadn’t just been physical. But Quilah kept his hands on the man, and Khelben slowly came to his senses. Once he was stable, Quilah directed his attentions back to his people.

Realizing Khelben was going to make it, we looked skyward, into orbit.

Cowboy was letting the black Atraxian ship have it with both barrels. He ordered every weapon, missile, and attack they had unleashed. They pounded that battleship mercilessly while it cut things in half with its dark-energy laser. Nothing stood against it. It was aiming for the battleship *Bright*, but against the fleet admiral's orders, other ships threw themselves in harm's way to block the weapon from hitting their flagship. While the *Bright* dodged, others took the damage for her. Some of those ships, knowing they were doomed, rammed the Atraxian vessel head on. The Murine fleet pummeled the enemy without rest, letting every megawatt of harm loose at will. The black ship went through ten Murine crafts before they finally destroyed it.

As its smoking carcass sank into the atmosphere and began plummeting toward the ground, we tried to move it aside so it wouldn't strike the surface, but it was too far, too heavy, and we were not strong enough. It hit somewhere 3,000 miles northeast and erupted in massive plumes of radioactive concussions.

Khelben stood up, and managed to look halfway stable.

I looked up at him.

"Tell me that wasn't Zorian." I said.

"That was Zorian energy," he said. "Nothing else could have hit the *Tooth of Earth*. It wasn't Zorians themselves, nor any direct technology. I don't understand."

Hearing him say that chilled us all to our bones. He admitted he didn't know what was going on.

"So," I said slowly, "there's something Zorian on Atrax?"

He lowered his head, too tired to hold it up any longer.

"Most likely," he said. "But it's not a Zorian itself. I would have seen that."

"Alright," I said.

In my mind, I asked for the link between us three. We left Khelben out. He was in no shape to aid us. In a fraction of a millisecond it was given to me, and I tessered back to the stardock.

I walked up to a shuttle and its crew. They shrank back before me in utter terror. They shook and tears welled up in their eyes. They looked exactly like the mice I took from their cages at the lab. I took them from their mothers, their friends, their family, and gave them into the hands of evil bastards with no compassion. Takers. And I was about to do just that.

"I need your ship," I told them. They nodded. I took the shuttle and flew it into space.

The battleship *Bright* wasn't hard to spot. I opened communications.

"Battleship *Bright*, this is... Um... A shuttle, I don't know its number. This is Jared Jacobson, one of the Beholden. Requesting docking procedures. I need to speak to Fleet Admiral Cowboy immediately."

Cowboy met me at the airlock. He had his high guard with him.

"No more hide and seek, eh?" he said.

"No," I said.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"The ship that wreaked havoc through your system, and destroyed my ride home, was influenced by a race one thousand times more advanced than you, called Zorians."

"Quilah told us about them. That's why nothing could stop that new weapon it used?"

"Correct. And that's just the beginning. They replicate things like that way too fast. Faster than your species. We need to get to Atrax and put an end to it, whatever it is. But we don't have our ship anymore."

"I see," he said. He paused in contemplation. Ever the strategist, he saw where I was going with it.

"Very well," he said. "Come with us. We are launching the assault on Atrax anyway, especially in light of this recent discovery. I'd like you all to join us as part of the invasion."

"Join the military?" I asked, grinning.

"That's right." He wasn't smiling.

This was a power play, and he was staring me straight in the eyes.

“Are you joking?” I said.

“Nope.”

I stared back. Vasserian eyes can be quite intimidating, but that mouse wasn't budging.

“We could go with you anyway,” I said.

“No you can't. If you could, you wouldn't have asked. We caught your crashed ship on video. You're not omnipotent.”

“Alright,” I said. “That's true. Still, you stubborn ass, we're here to help. You're not making it easy.”

“Come with us as members of our society. Join, and it will show everyone you're not above us. Eager to help us on our own terms. You want to be accepted? Let me put rank on you.”

“*Are you listening?*” I sent to the others.

“Yes,” Avaril sent back. “*Accept his offer.*”

I knew better than to argue with that woman. But that didn't stop me from negotiating.

“Admiral rank at least,” I said.

“You don't know the first thing about being a Murine admiral,” He said. “You can all be lieutenant commanders.”

“Oh, *hell* no,” I said. “I'm not taking orders from a bunch of mi... Murines. Only you and maybe not even then!”

He grinned. He had me. Dammit, these mice were crafty.

“Accepted. Rear Admirals, all, directly under my command,” he said. “Get your asses aboard my ship and let's go.”

I didn't miss the intentional joke.

“*Get up here,*” I sent.

“*Khelben is staying,*” Karen sent. “*He is in no shape to go, and someone has to stay to defend the planet in case another attack comes.*”

“*The entire fleet was sitting at Atrax recently,*” I sent. “*We're going to encounter heavy resistance, but the objective is to get in, finish off the Zorian influence and get out.*”

“*Cowboy's objective is probably to finish off the Atrax, period,*” Avaril sent.

“*Well, that might not be a bad idea,*” I sent. Then I thought of what Quilah would say. I couldn't deny feeling like a Cro-Magnon man for just wanting to kill everything that caused me difficulty and didn't cooperate. “*Maybe there's another way, but we need to go now, before they build any more of those beam weapons.*”

In the background, Karen and Avaril were standing in smoke that smelled absolutely foul. Like burning ten-day-old corpses.

“*What the hell is that smell?*” I sent. “*Where are you?*”

“*We've tessered over to the crash site of the Atraxian ship,*” Avaril sent.

“*I've found our answer,*” Khelben sent. His signal sounded weak and faint. “*We're on our way up. Send a shuttle for us.*”

The entire fleet was mobilizing, every available ship meeting up between the moons. Damage control was underprepared for the level of destruction the Zorian weapon had unleashed. It took Khelben twenty minutes to arrive. I guessed that might drive him crazy, but when he arrived, he looked like his old stone self, minus an arm and an eye. Maybe he was just too tired to give a shit.

We all met at the tactical room off the bridge of the *Bright*. Cowboy and all his senior staff were there. They were looking at us with extreme trepidation. Khelben limped in, trying to look stoic and mostly pulling it off.

He held up a sliver of black crystal above his hand with TK, about three inches long and an inch wide. It glowed with dark malice.

“This was the weapon,” he said.

“No way!” I exclaimed. “*That* little thing? What??”

“The Atraxians built the actual gun around it,” Khelben said. “But this was the power source. It is a piece of a new type of Zorian craft, patterned after our own crystal ships. It is possible that one crashed on Atrax, either in the distant past or recent past — say eight thousand years, and they unearthed it. These crystals have anti-life, anti-matter frequencies, just like our ships respond to life and pure energy. All they had to do was use newfound technology to focus the radiation into a beam.”

He didn’t need to say it, but we all got it. The tech the Atrax used to make said weapon was stolen from the Murines, which had been granted by us.

“There will be more of this where this came from,” Khelben said. “Possibly much more.”

Cowboy was squinting at the crystal shard. We could feel its built-in malevolence from where we stood. It was a piece of death. Black, soulless death. I shivered.

“Does this black crystal ship have any intelligence on its own?” Cowboy said. “Could there be Zorians on Atrax?”

“I can’t read it deep enough to know,” Khelben said. “But likely not. It probably responds to the intentions of those who send energy into it — thoughts and emotions — like our ships do. The Zoriath are ever attempting to mimic us in every way, trying in their own twisted way to replicate life.”

“But the vibrations from this crashed Zorian ship could have messed with the Atrax,” I said. “Mutated them, sent them down the bad path.”

Khelben nodded grimly. “Absolutely.”

“Total eradication it is,” I said.

Cowboy grinned at me and nodded like a mousey Jack Nicholson.

“No,” Karen said. “An entire species that might be saved...”

“Let’s consider it an option,” Avaril said.

“Total eradication it is,” Cowboy echoed. He hit the open channel intercom. “Captains, ready the fleet for jump to Atrax. Fleet-wide jump commences in five hours. Battle stations. Red Alert.”

Hundreds of affirmatives came back over the speaker.

“*What have we done?*” Karen sent to us.

“*Bought the E-ticket,*” I sent. “*Now we take the ride.*”

