

## CHAPTER 19

### *The Battle of Atrax*

It took exactly five hours, by Cowboy's command, for the entire massive fleet to maneuver into position for jumping as a group. Cowboy and his staff spent the entire time discussing tactics, with Khelben contributing his wisdom as well. He had literally seen millions of interstellar wars. He corrected them on many things, but in the end, it came down to a decision. And Cowboy made it without hesitation. Take every available ship and finish this once and for all, risking a great deal, leaving their home planet virtually unprotected. If they failed, what remained of the Atraxian fleet could sail in and burn Muscila at will, if they got past the orbital and moon defenses. It was an all or nothing play. Cowboy's strong suit.

Just as the ships were almost all in position, shown on a holographic display over the command center of Cowboy's gigantic bridge, a communications officer called out to the fleet admiral.

"Sir, a class C shuttle from the surface is requesting docking procedures."

Cowboy took the call himself. "Late arrival, this had better be important."

The voice of the shuttle pilot answered. "Sir, one more crew member requesting permission to board."

And then in the background, "You're still missing your chief medical officer," came Quilah's voice. "Or did you replace me already?"

Cowboy smiled. "Welcome aboard, Admiral. Docking permission granted."

So Quilah came aboard. He was wearing a new uniform this time, worthy of his new rank. Blue with five white bands. Serious rank. I looked at his stripes and made a *Nice Job* face. He shrugged. Rank meant nothing to him.

"Lily?" I asked.

"Staying to run the camp and house," Quilah said. "She remembers last time all too well. Plus she's..."

The door to the bridge opened.

An older beige female mouse came in, with grey hairs mixed into her coat and soft blue eyes, wearing a blue uniform with three white bands. She looked just like Quilah.

Quilah's face melted. The woman's face did the same. They rushed into each other, nosing, sniffing, rubbing faces. Cowboy came up behind Quilah.

"Quilah," he said, "our mother. Aladie is her name."

Cowboy held his tears in front of his crew, but the crew stood and saluted out of respect. Quilah and Aladie could not hold theirs back.

"My son, my brave, brave boy," she said. "I'm so proud of you."

Quilah's words stopped in his throat, so stayed next to her, their noses side by side.

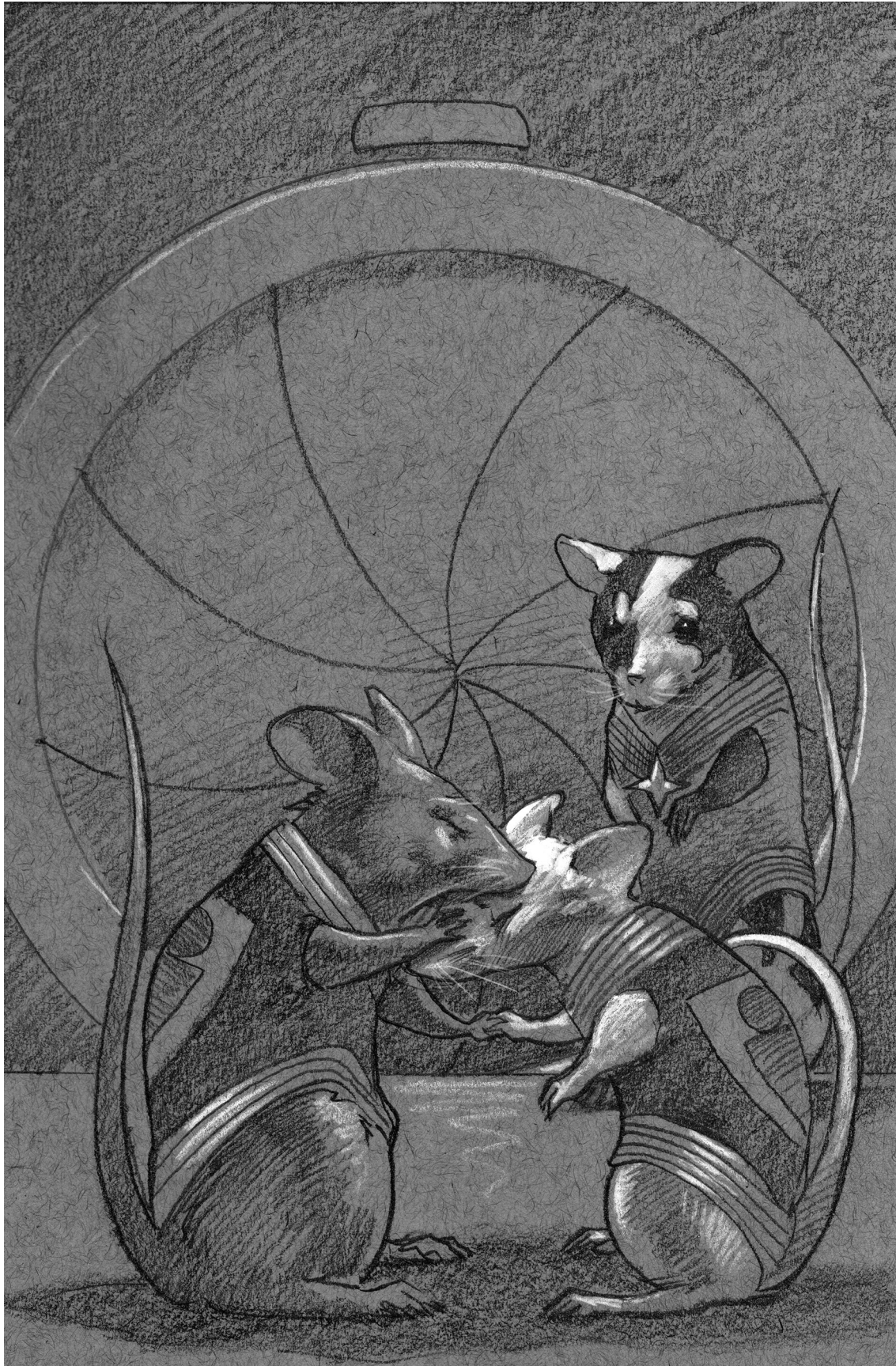
I must admit my heart felt lighter. Seeing the reunion, I felt that maybe, out of all this mess, we had done something good after all.

Cowboy let it go on a full minute.

"Report to your stations," he bellowed. "Prepare for jump."

Quilah and Aladie turned and crawled off the bridge, headed for medical, with a new spring in their steps.







I followed them. I never wanted to be far from Quilah. The others remained on the bridge, but Khelben took Quilah's shuttle back to the surface. With what little power he had left, he would remain the sentinel at the gate in case we didn't come back.

The medical center was huge, and brand new high tech. Older ships didn't really *have* a medical center. This one was the size of a shopping mall. It had room for 800 beds and forty surgical stations. The total crew of the battleship *Bright* was around 4,000. No expense had been spared. Quilah was in charge of it all.

His staff stood and saluted him.

But my boy went right to the communications module and opened a channel.

Lily appeared on the screen, bigger than ever, smiling happily.

"Lily, this is my mom!" Quilah said.

Lily nodded, smiled widely, and bowed her nose to Aladie.

"Oh, she's so beautiful!" Aladie said. "And so well groomed. That's a gorgeous ring you have, my daughter."

Lily blushed. Her nose and ears turned bright pink.

"Thank you," she said. "It's an honor to meet you, most revered mother of my mate. He has spoken of you many times. I know it was one of his dearest wishes to see you again. You are always welcome with us."

I blinked.

"We will eat and drink and talk when I return," Aladie said. "I look forward to meeting you."

Quilah and Lily exchanged glances. They knew something.

"It will be a wonderful celebration," Lily said. "For all of us."

Dammit, I couldn't scan that far. Was Lily...?

"We will be back very soon, my mate," Quilah said. "Very soon. Then this will all be over, and we can be together."

"I will look forward to it every hour," Lily said. She smiled sweetly. "May the Beholden bless your journey and your efforts, and keep all of you safe."

"And you, my love," Quilah said. "Eat well, get plenty of rest."

She nodded. Quilah and his mom turned away so she could give him the tour of medical. I was left in front of the monitor with Lily.

I gave her the eye, I did.

She giggled. "You thought I was simple," she said.

I drew back and put a hand on my chest. "Me? Nooo, no... I never..."

"You thought I was a retard," she said, giggling more.

I coughed and choked some. "Nah... Not... Not really... I knew..."

"You didn't know diddly," she said cheerfully.

I was silenced. Damn smart mice. Trickiest race in the universe.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," I said. "It... It kinda looked that way."

"Just because someone is happy," she said, "Doesn't mean they aren't thinking. I just keep my thoughts on things that feel good, and nothing else. It keeps me strong for Quilah."

She was looking right into my eyes, for the first time.

I had to giggle to myself.

"I get it. Thank you, Lily. You are wise."

"No problem," she said, turning away to munch on some ard. "Keep him safe, Jared." She looked at me again, cheeks full. "Keep him safe."

I swallowed. "I promise," I said.

I heard the jump drives spinning up.

She smiled and turned off the monitor.

Alright then.

Maybe everything would be okay.

The jump took four days. Almost all the ships had been upgraded to Q-drives, but not many of them had the advanced Q-system that the battleship *Bright* used. So we had to slow down for them, or risk arriving without backup.

On the first day, we all met in the staircase for a workout. Running forty-four flights of stairs between the decks of the ship was a great workout for a mouse. For us Vasserians, it was effortless. We could do it all day. But Cowboy was having a blast outrunning his senior staff.

"I need to know everything you can do, whatever you are," he said between breaths. Mice were fast. He was doing 45 miles per hour up those metal stairs, taking five stairs at a time. Anyone using that particular stairwell dodged radically out of the way upon seeing the master and commander racing up for his daily exercise.

Jogging casually at 44.99 miles an hour, I replied, "Really? How's it feel to want, big guy?"

Avaril poked me hard.

"You're on my ship, in my war, and you have a lot of power," he said. "Even if you don't have all of it." I felt him grinning. "I need to know what your abilities are, and I want to know now!"

I sighed. Avaril nodded at me. So we told him. Granted, it was a vague, abstract list, but some things were written in stone. It took six sets of stairs to complete the report.

At the end, he stopped. We were well ahead of the rest of the staff.

"Okay," he said, facing us. "When I tell you to do something, you do it, understood? Lives hang in the balance. Don't give me any lip, no smartass comments. Just obey."

"Okay," I growled.

He nodded his head once, and departed through the lower hatch.

"He grew up sharp," I said to Avaril.

"Necessity breeds strength," she said back. She followed the fleet admiral.

"He's cute," Karen said.

I looked at her like she'd grown a second head. She smiled and left also.

I ran some more stairs before joining Quilah in medical.

When I walked in, he saw me and smiled warmly.

"Hi, Jared," he said.

"Hi, buddy," I replied. "Where's Mom?"

"Over there by the surgery station. She's a surgeon," He blushed and smiled.

"Oh, Mom's smart *and* cute," I said. "Yeah, makes sense."

He kept preparing emergency supplies.

"No more flying for while," he said.

"Ah, we can do that when we get back. My ride is toast. I'm gonna be staying with you until..." I was going to say *until you're old and grey*, but it stopped by itself. "For a long time."

"You're always welcome at my nest," he said. "Everything that's happened has been because of you. We owe you everything."

I knew he meant only the good stuff, but that dang mind of mine couldn't help but think of the bad things we'd brought them as well. And it could get a whole lot worse if things didn't go according to plan.

"Quilah, you know what we're about to get into is going to be a thousand times worse than that first ship battle, right?" I asked. "And as I recall, you didn't appreciate that one too much."

"Yeah," he said.

"Lots of Murines and Atrax are going to die," I said. "You're not going to be able to heal even a tiny fraction of

them.”

“I know.”

“Then, if I may ask, why did you come? Sucker for an ass-biting?”

“No, man,” he said. Like Khelben, he was picking up our slang, and we were picking up theirs. “I came because I know I have to. I don’t know why. I just know I have to be here.”

“All that mysterious stuff we Alpha Knights can’t see or understand, huh?”

“I think you called it faith,” he said. He gave me that cheeky, adorable smile. It shut me up. I couldn’t resist that. In him, or Avaril. I’m such a sucker.

I knelt down and scratched him behind his ears. Finally, I could do it for real. He tilted his head to the side to enjoy it.

“I’ve got your back, pal,” I said.

“I know,” he said with confidence.

Minutes before we came out of the final jump, Cowboy organized formations and opened a channel to all ships.

“Attention, Muscilan fleet,” he said in his deep command voice. “This is Fleet Admiral Cowboy. We are about to enter Atraxian space.” He paused. “It’s been a long war. This is going to be the end of it. We are here to wipe the enemy from the face of the galaxy. There will be no quarter. I expect all of you to give it everything you’ve got. Take nothing home. This is our shining moment. We could have waited, small and afraid, like *mice*, for them to come to us. We could have slunk back into our holes. But we shall not! We have brought the fight to them for daring to attack our noble planet. They shall know this day that they made a fatal error the day they first attacked us. We give back a hundredfold what we get! Give us good, and we repay with trust, forgiveness, and acceptance.” He looked at me, then back to the monitor. “But give us harm, and payback is going to be final. We go forth into battle for our families, our future, and for vengeance,” he held up his fist. “Let’s show them our wrath!”

The cheering overwhelmed the speakers and rang through the very hull of the ship. These mice would follow him anywhere, into anything.

And we would too.

“Coming out of jump in one minute,” Yalli said.

“Arm all weapons,” Cowboy said. “Arm the spinal mount, raise all shields, including the blue screen.”

*Blue screen?* Khelben, you old softy, you. I had to smile.

The front monitor took on a bright sapphire tinge. It reminded me of Murine eyes.

“Upon exit, assume formation B2,” Cowboy said.

“Exiting jump, Sir.”

“This is it, Murines,” Cowboy said. “Look sharp.” He looked at us. “Report anything you deem worthy.”

“Sir,” Avaril said.

We came out of jump and into open space well above Atrax, out of range of their ground cannons and defense systems.

Nothing hit us.

A moment of disbelieving silence followed.

Then Karen lost it.

She went to her knees, holding her head. We rushed to her.

“Karen?!” Avaril said.

“It’s the crystal!” she said. “I can feel it. It’s... awake. It wasn’t before. It knows... It knows we’re here. It’s... Horrible! Oh, God! It’s horrible!”

“It’s going to be horribly destroyed within the hour,” I said. “Can you hang on?”

"It's... Just the most wrong thing I've ever... I've..." She closed her eyes and rocked back and forth.

Then we all looked back at the monitor.

We sat there in space, heading forward at a cruising charge, and Atrax was empty.

No ships in port. No ships in docks, no ships at the starbases. No ships, period.

"Oh, shit," I said.

"Are they cloaked?" Cowboy asked me.

I saw nothing. And if they were cloaked, my eyes would have seen it.

"No, Sir," I said.

"Scouts *Harrier* and *Vicious*," he commanded, "Go around the planet, have a look at the other side. Scouts *Tyrannical* and *Global Fire*, turn around and scout the asteroid belt. Find out where they're hiding."

The ships bolted off at top speed to carry out his orders.

"They're not hiding," Avaril said ominously.

Cowboy frowned. "I know. But we have to be sure."

"They're heading for Muscila, aren't they?" I asked.

Cowboy paused. "Probably," he said.

"Oh, God," I said.

"They had the same idea," Karen said, dread thick in her voice. Tears were streaming from her eyes. She was holding back stark terror. We all felt it. It didn't help our morale, but she didn't know how to defend herself. Her sensitivity was being used against her. Her clairvoyance hadn't seen one single moment of it coming. That black crystal had powers we couldn't match.

"Nothing we can do about it now," Cowboy said. "We took our roll of the dice."

"If their fleet has those crystal shards mounted..." I began.

"Nothing we can do about that now!" Cowboy shouted. He punched the com button. "Fleet Admiral to all ships — formation D7. Launch fighters. Prepare rail guns. Full attack! Repeat — Fire at will! Full attack!"

"Can you find that crystal?" he asked us.

"Need to get closer," I told him.

Karen was holding her head as if it was going to explode.

"That's pretty much guaranteed," he said. In the monitor, we saw the dark grayish-green planet growing steadily.

The planetary defenses opened up on us. We saw hundreds of our fighters rush out ahead of us to take them out. Our fleet began taking damage. The planet's weapons couldn't penetrate the blue screen, but the flagship was the only vessel that had one. Guess they weren't that easy to build.

The scouts reported no Atraxian ships in either the asteroid belt or behind the planet.

Their fleet was on its way to Muscila. It looked like a queen-for-queen move, but it might just end with both races wiped out. The Vasserian version of adrenaline raced through my system. We had gambled. It was going to cost us. We had no idea how much jump their ships could manage, or when in the last four days they had departed.

The fleet was taking heavy fire, and giving it straight back. We hammered their starbases. The battleship *Bright* fired their Factor-T Meson spinal mount, and an entire starbase went up in a series of bright flashes. Its dead hulk fell into the atmosphere like a dying comet. We let loose with twenty particle cannons, each one ten times more powerful than the one on the *Quick Tooth* had been, and more starbases perished. We were wading through them, taking no damage ourselves due to the blue screen. The screen absorbed all the enemy fire and redirected it, keeping our ship powered-up enough to keep every system redlining all at once. It swallowed the incoming fire, missiles and all, and our blazing engines brought us to orbital distance from Atrax itself. Space was lit up with gunfire, missiles, explosions, debris, and smoke. It was so complicated I wondered how Cowboy could

manage it, but his training held fast. He kept his eye on the 3-D hologram at the center of the bridge, and issued orders as needed. He was good at it. He sounded like he had been in a thousand battles. He had it in hand.

“Prepare for trigger-free bombardment of—” he started.

Then a massive, burning black beam pulsed up from the nightside surface, arcing out into space, cutting four ships in half. The beam was as wide as a city street. The black ship that had attacked Khelben had a beam that was needle-thin. Our ships didn’t stand a chance. Karen screamed at the top of her lungs. She felt every death. It was as if the beam had hit her soul.

“There it is!” I said, pointing at the ground end of the beam.

“No shit,” Cowboy replied.

The beam swept across space, severing eight more ships. We were defenseless against it. It would be a massacre.

“Focus all fire on the source of that black beam!” Cowboy ordered.

“Enemy fighters coming up from the surface, Sir!” an officer yelled.

“Tell our fighters to engage,” Cowboy replied. “Fire the spinal mount. Get that crystal down!”

The fleet hit the beam source with everything they had. The beam kept firing. It swept across our formations, destroying everything it touched. We lost ten percent of the fleet in seconds. Ships went down, plummeting into the atmosphere and aiming for military targets if they could on their way to their doom.

The screen zoomed in on the surface, at the business end of that black beam. Sure enough, it was a massive black crystal, maybe one hundred feet tall, in a huge crater we had made around it. But the crystal itself wasn’t touched. It had a horrible egg of black glow around it, and ignored our assault as if it wasn’t there. It looked terrible, but it felt even worse. It felt like doom. Despair. Utter hopelessness. It and the beam both radiated those feelings like the unthinkable weapon it was, and ships began to flee in panic, blindly losing morale and taking any exit they could to escape. But escape was impossible, and they were cut down as well. Cowboy’s ears were back and his tail drummed on the ground furiously. Even he was feeling it. He kept giving orders nonetheless.

“Nothing can hit it!” Murismie yelled.

The bridge doors opened and Quilah came out onto the command deck. He was staring down at the crystal.

“It... hates us...” he said.

I watched as he looked directly at it. No other mice could. Even I had trouble gazing at it for more than a second.

“You aren’t afraid?” I asked him.

He looked at me. “No, there’s no need for fear. It’s an illusion.” He looked back.

“Damn good illusion!” Cowboy yelled, wincing as if in pain. Some of his crew had fled their stations. The black beam crossed right in front of us, destroying two carriers and one of the other four battleships in one pass. Some crew members screamed in terror, some pissed themselves. A few died of fear right on the spot. We all felt it. Even we Knights were barely keeping our wits about us, and Karen was barely hanging on. Her ears, eyes, and nose were bleeding. But Quilah sat there, calm as you please.

He looked at me.

“It has to go,” he said.

“No shit!” I said.

“It’s holding Atraxian spirits prisoner,” he said. “That’s what it uses as power. Fear and pain from all it has enslaved. It has to be destroyed. The spirits must be freed before they are devoured. It’s already too late for some.”

“That must be why it took so long to surface,” Avaril said. “It had to start slow with whatever came close enough. It’s been eating this race and creating more pain and terror for 8,000 years. And now it’s up to speed. Fucking thing.”

Avaril tessered outside the bridge, into the atmosphere, and pointed herself at the ground like a missile.



She leapt into a high-speed dive, dodging the beam as it swung toward her. She vanished into the smoke and darkness.

I grabbed Cowboy and looked him in the eye. “Do you have any more fighters?”

He nodded. “The new Chrysalis class are on deck fourteen,” he said.

“Do you have any really heavy warheads?”

“The new quantum bombs,” he said. “They’re not tested yet. Also on deck fourteen.”

Quantum bombs. Same tech level as the blue screen. World breakers. Good job, Khelben. Cheating like hell might have just saved our ass. It might work.

I turned my head to scan for deck fourteen, ready to tesser there, and Quilah put his hand on my tunic.

“Take me,” he said.

I did. We were instantly on the deck. The fighter hangar was as wide as two football fields and ten times as long. Mice rushed everywhere, working as fast as they could to keep the missile racks full and the weapons firing.

I used TK to load one of the three enormous quantum bombs underneath the Chrysalis-class fighter — a sleek, deadly looking craft about forty feet long. I scanned the bomb, located its core, and pulled two shards of our ruined ship, the *Tooth of Earth*, out of my tunic. I looked at Quilah.

“Smart,” he said.

“I kept it as a souvenir,” I said. “Wasn’t planning this, honestly. I just liked them cause they were shiny.”

“You’d make a good Murine,” he said.

“Quilah, millions — maybe billions — of Atrax are gonna die if this works, and we’re gonna die if it doesn’t.”

“You keep warning me like I don’t know,” he said. “I do know. I understand.”

“Well, you’re all against war and fighting...”

“Their spirits are still savable,” he said. “Their bodies are already mostly gone. That machine must be destroyed at all costs. If we don’t, no race is safe, anywhere.”

Yeah, Khelben had warned us. That was about the size of it. Compared to something of that magnitude, everything else was small change. Really small. I nodded to Quilah. He was wiser than I.

I tessered one amber crystal shard into the heart of the core, without detonating the bomb. I had to move things out of the way, rearrange the innards of the device, but I made it work. I put the other shard away. Then I got into the fighter. It was made for a mouse, and not even remotely comfortable for a human-shaped being.

“*I can’t approach it,*” Avaril sent to us from the planet. Her sending was garbled and weak, like sideband radio, sounding weird. “*It’s too powerful! And I can’t tesser it either! Space around it is wrong — bent at non-Euclidian angles! I can’t get a read on it!*” She sounded strained. “*This thing is attacking my... my mind... It hurts! Ah, AHHH!...*” And then we lost contact with her.

Son of a bitch.

Our entire fleet was pounding the crap out of the planet at that spot. If she lost consciousness, she was going to be disintegrated.

“Karen,” I called. “*Is Avaril still alive?*”

After one second, Karen, sounding like she was dying, sent, “Yes.”

“*I’m going in. We’re going to need her tesseract range to get me out. Tell Cowboy to get the ship as low as he can, as fast as he can.*”

I moved to close the hatch. Quilah jumped into the ship. There was only one seat.

“Hey, buddy, I like you, but it’s kinda cramped in here...” I said.

“I have to go,” he said, slight panic on his face.

“Not a chance,” I said. But before I could finish, he interrupted me.

“I know I have to go, Jared! I don’t know why. I just know. You’re Vasserian. It’s ready for you. I don’t feel its effects. I can get near enough to it, and it’s not ready for me!”



"Kiddo," I said, "That's a quantum bomb. It makes a nuclear explosion look like a match flame. If Avaril isn't awake — if we don't time this perfectly, there's going to be nothing left."

He looked right at me. "If you don't take me, it won't work."

A second passed between us. He had that surety going. I trusted him.

"Get in," I said. I got out. He got in and laid down behind the stick.

"I don't know how to..." he began.

"Hold on to your brain," I said.

I used the Alpha Knight download on him. I'd never tried it before, much less on an alien. Khelben had warned me not to link with other species, and especially not to do anything too intense or fast to their brains. I was risking Quilah's sanity, but for some reason it seemed the right thing to do.

His eyes blinked widely. His mouth hung open, and for a moment I feared I had lobotomized him.

"I... I'm a pilot!" he said after a moment. "A *really good* pilot!"

"I know kung fu," I said. He didn't get it. "You ready?"

He gripped the stick like it was old hat. "Ready."

The ship hovered into the launch tube. I stood beside it. This was serious super-hero shit. I assumed a heroic stance.

The ship launched and I leapt after it. In moments we were in space, rocketing away from the battleship *Bright*, outside the blue screen. Shockwaves, heat, and debris assaulted us. I formed a diamond-hard TK wedge before us, and we began the descent. I linked with Karen.

"Begin free fall," Cowboy ordered. "Cut all maneuver engines. Spin up the Q-drive."

Behind us, the massive white battleship let itself sink into the atmosphere, rapidly gaining speed. The black beam swept around in deadly circles, burning ships down like they were paper. Half of our fleet was gone.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Cowboy asked me through Karen. The link was laced with agony.

"*Not even a little*," I replied.

"Well all our lives are riding on you, Jared," he said with a voice of ice. "Don't fuck it up."

Right. No pressure.

Quilah and I streaked downward into the holocaust, the battleship trailing far behind us. Sure enough, the black beam knew we were coming, and swung into our path. Dozens of fighters shot up to intercept us.

I gently linked with Quilah. I think it worked because of our close emotional bond.

"*Can you hear me, buddy?*"

"*I do! I really do!*" he replied.

I sent him tactics at the speed of thought. Murine thought, I hoped. We split up, dodging the beam. He had to engage some of the fighters, and they had him outnumbered forty to one. I soared in to his rescue, firing lightning bolts out of my eyes (really!) and shot down several fighters, but the mouse didn't need my help. Apparently the fighter-pilot skill Khelben had given us was from the best pilot in Vasserian history. And, like all other Vasserian things, it translated seamlessly into flying just about anything. Quilah was a top ace, as if he had thousands of kills under his belt. He spun, dodged, twisted, and rolled away from them on his way down. I finished them off as fast as I could, and Quilah dodged all of them, but too many of them got behind us. Now we were in trouble.

We heard the pulse of particle cannons from above and the fighters began exploding. Murismie was picking them off with frightening accuracy. Frightening because we were in the line of fire. But he didn't miss once. He cleared the air for us. As I risked a glance backward, the looming shadow of the falling battleship *Bright* filled the sky. The blue screen was wreathed in flames. An intimidating sight, especially knowing who was at the helm.

"*Avaril!*" I sent. No response.

As we came out from the low cloud layer like two diving meteors, we saw the crystal. And, Quilah was right,

my head immediately went insane. I had a panic-attack reaction on the spot. Every trauma of my life revisited me in one instant. Every shocking moment, every crushing loss. I couldn't function. I knew I had made a terrible mistake. Khelben would never have tried it. I lost my dive and Quilah overshot me immediately. He was on his own, stooping through a hail of weapons fire and explosions. Any one of them could end his fragile life... I saw it one hundred times... The crystal was happy to show me. I screamed, and suddenly understood the weakness of Alpha Knights. Stop their mind, and all their power didn't matter. If they couldn't focus on their powers, they were almost helpless. And Zorians, even Zorian artifacts, knew it.

Cowboy pin-cushioned the ground with turret fire from the *Bright*, killing tens of thousands of troops and heavy armor waiting for anyone who might attack the crystal. The black beam swung around — unbearably intense at this close range, screaming mindless horror and unforgettable thoughts. Quilah skipped around it, and it missed me by luck as I tumbled out of control toward a very sudden stop a mile below. The beam hit the port flank of the *Bright*, slightly dimmed passing through the blue screen, but still ate into the hull. Explosions and smoke ripped from the ship, tearing up into the air behind its meteoric plunge.

"Now!" Cowboy yelled. "We're out of room!"

My blurred, tear-streaked eyes glanced downward and saw missiles coming up for Quilah. Lots of missiles. I couldn't think straight. It was all I could do to focus on one thing — so I sent all my willpower into the strongest TK shield I could manage around my friend, funneling backward in the hopes that it might protect me as well.

Missiles detonated and Quilah held course. The explosions blew me back up into the air, toward the descending battleship, but not before I saw what was on the ground.

Avaril was up, and fighting hand-to-hand with the Atrax. Like Athena herself, she was sweeping the oncoming hordes with spectral lightning, hitting them with massive TK bursts, even punching their black, grotesque heads from their shoulders when they got too close. She was deflecting every bullet, every rocket, and crushing tanks as they came within range. She was tessering herself one hundred times a second, dodging lasers. She was breathing emerald fire. I gawked at the scene. It was something from a comic book. She was handing them hell, and they couldn't take her. Even more, she was fighting off the effect of the crystal at ground zero. She had always been the stable one amongst us.

She looked up, saw everything, and understood.

"JARED!" Quilah screamed through our link. He was seconds from impact. True to his gut feeling, the black crystal could not see him, just like he couldn't feel it. His crippled, smoking fighter passed right through the horrible black shield.

Avaril spun and kicked right through four armored, sickening black creatures, crouched and performed the tesseract we all prayed she had in her.

Quilah was traveling at over mach forty. I was falling in a random, unpredictable pattern. The battleship *Bright* was hurling toward its impact, and the planet was spinning. Space around the crystal was still bent into inconceivably complicated patterns. There was noise, debris, smoke, and concussions. Quilah was *inside* the black shield. We had bet it all on Avaril, really.

All of it happened in under a millionth of a second. Which was all the time we had.

She flickered out.

She grabbed Quilah from the cockpit just as he pressed the trigger on the bomb.

She tessered to me. Grabbed me before the speed-of-light quasar detonation could strike us.

And landed us all square on the bridge of the battleship *Bright*, both of us in her arms.

"GO!" Cowboy shrieked.

Yalli hit the jump button.

And we were yanked backward, into a Q-jump free of the planet's grip.

A second later when we lurched to a halt, we saw the dark side of the planet go up. The quasar bomb blinded







the monitors from 100,000 miles away for several seconds. We watched as it expanded, swallowing oceans, crossing continents, wiping out cities. It burned the atmosphere. It was like watching a meteor the size of Kansas hit the planet. Destruction roared out in every direction. The white ball of energy itself expanded to 800 miles, and ate into the planet's core. Lava erupted one thousand miles into orbit. Tidal waves twenty miles high ramped out in every direction. Cracks thousands of miles long struck out across the surface, blazing with quasar light.

The dark energy stopped.

Immediately, sanity returned. Avaril collapsed, as did I. Quilah was sucking breath as fast as he could. We smelled like acrid smoke and burning metal. We stood like statues, witnessing the devastation of Atrax for ten long minutes until the explosion had stopped spreading. Twenty minutes later, only a massive cloud of ash covered the planet.

The entire Atraxian defense system had shut down. Their fighters went dead, floating and rolling in space.

Silence reigned on the bridge. Maybe across the entire fleet.

Karen shuddered, then got a look of astonishment on her face. She reached out to me without taking her eyes off the monitor.

I almost pulled away, fearful of what was going on in her head, but I let her grab my arm.

We saw what she saw.

A mist of soft, dim lights was growing from the surface. Then I realized the lights weren't on the surface. It was a trick of perspective. They were already most of the way to us and still approaching. Floating wistfully, like tiny insects, swarming up out of their scorched world and reaching toward us. They were through the walls of the ship before I could wonder if they were some new weapon.

They were spirits. Poor, tiny, emaciated Atraxian spirits.

They were one-hundredth the size and brightness of the Murine spirits. Tiny, tiny dim lights struggling to stay lit. But oh, so many of them. They formed a mist of dismal light around Quilah. The bridge was full of them. Many thousands in a single square inch. And nobody could see them except Karen and I. Everyone else was oblivious. In their own pathetic way, the Atraxian souls were beautiful. And very, very sad.

Slowly, ever so slowly, as if trying not to, they began to fade away.

Quilah looked at the monitor with deep compassion etched on his white face. His ruby eyes showed deep regret. Still, Quilah had done what he had to. Cowboy knew it, and moved his gaze from the screen to his friend, let it linger there awhile in respect, and then moved it back.

"Their spirits are free," Quilah whispered.

He knew. He couldn't see them, but he knew. He had been right all along.

Slowly, the fleet regrouped as the last of the Atraxian spirits winked out.

That was it. The system defenses were destroyed along with the planet. Nothing was going to survive that. We were taking no more fire.

Our fleet was in terrible shape. We had one-third of our ships left, and they had taken heavy damage. Even the *Bright* had taken hits. Its blue screen was down after only a few strikes from the crystal weapon. The air smelled like ozone and acid. The black beam had been a game changer.

The damage report came in, among others. Engineering had taken hits. Cargo was gone. Weapons were seventy-five percent offline. We had recovered only sixty percent of our fighters. The power plant was making funny noises. But morally, the worst hit, on the port side of the ship, had been the medical center.

It was gone. No survivors.

"Arm rail guns!" Cowboy yelled.

"No," Quilah croaked.

Cowboy spun in his chair, furious.

"What!" he bellowed. "We're here to finish them! Down to every last black wretch among them! They have

moonbases. Bases on other planets in the system. Stray fighters. I'm not going to leave one damn Atraxian alive!"

"No." Quilah said more calmly.

Cowboy glared at him as if *he* was going to hurl lightning bolts from his eyes. The entire bridge crew, 120 Murines, went deathly quiet.

Quilah slowly got to his feet.

"Our *mother* was in medical!" he hissed at Quilah.

Quilah looked down at the ground. Then, slowly, he looked up again. His eyes were shiny with tears.

"I know," he said.

Then he looked at the monitor of the ruptured planet.

"Look at it, Cowboy," he said. "They're finished."

"Not yet," Cowboy growled.

"The thing causing them pain... The thing twisting their minds and making them violent... Is gone, Admiral," Quilah said. "At this point, it's genocide against a helpless species."

"So be it!" Cowboy raised his hand to give the command. The rail guns would hurl *actual* meteors down upon the planet, annihilating the bases, every other planet in the solar system. And assuring the destruction of every last living thing.

"Helpless," Karen said. "Like you were." Her eyes were full of golden luminescent blood, her face was streaked with pain. She looked like someone recovering from the plague, but she was awake.

Cowboy stopped. He cast a death glare at Karen, whose shields held firm.

"When the Takers had you. Trapped. Helpless. Tortured," she said. "*Someone* had mercy on you, way back then. Way back in your beginning. *Someone* spared you. And brought you to the Beholden, who were waiting. If they hadn't, you'd still be... Helpless. Like you were as children. You remember."

"It's just a myth!" he said.

"The only myth we have," Quilah said. "If you end them all now, when they can't fight back, it's dishonorable. If you do this, Cowboy, you're no better than the Takers, and you become the new myth."

Cowboy cursed like a true sailor. He stomped the ground. He ground his teeth. His tail went off like a rattle on a snake. He shrieked at the top of his lungs. It was a terrible noise. Hate, despair, and grief all at once.

He turned to give the command anyway.

"How long will it take?!" Quilah yelled.

"What?!" Cowboy replied.

"How long," Quilah said, "will the bombardment take?" He walked around to face Cowboy. "Because right now, Atraxian ships are either approaching Muscila, or they're already there."

That did it. Cowboy almost lost it. He grabbed Quilah by the neck. I thought he was going to bite his brother's head off, and I wasn't sure if I had enough power left to even tesser his teeth out.

But he caught himself. Slowly, Quilah's logic reached him. Their home. It was under attack. Hali. Lily.

He looked back at Atrax. No chance of Murines living there anytime soon.

He released Quilah and sat down.

Staring out into space, he asked, "How many ships can make the single jump?"

"Twenty-four functional single-Q-jump ships are ready, Sir," Yalli said.

On the screen, the entire fleet had already turned around, pointed home.

Cowboy lowered his head. Only a moment passed.

"All ships who can follow us, do so at top speed. All others, follow as fast as you can."

"Yes, Sir!" Yalli issued the command.

Cowboy raised his head. His eyes were graven steel.

"Get us home, Yalli."

“Sir,” Yalli said, and pressed the jump button once again.

And as the ship lurched into jump, Cowboy and Quilah stared at each other, tears streaming from both their empty faces.

