

## Chapter 6

### *Muscila*

Remember when Indiana Jones said, “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

The race we were there to protect, the natives of Muscila, were... mice.

Big mice. Human-sized mice. Mice that evolved, clearly, to build starships and wage war, and have an entire civilization. They had language in supersonic ranges, and all kinds of advanced social traits, and they even had opposable thumbs. But they were definitely mice.

Was I in hell? Was this my punishment?

I stood there, in the middle of one of their cities, invisible, intangible, and (thank God) unsmellable, watching hundreds of fast moving rodents run to and from, every which way, along paths and tunnels, above and underground, like a scene out of rush hour in New York City. My mouth was hanging open. Again, my body refused to panic, for which I was grateful.

“How cuuute!” Avaril squealed. A new side to her.

“Oh, they’re adorable!” Karen said.

Khelben was silent. He’d seen enough races, I suppose, that if the Muscilans had been flaming blobs of puke he wouldn’t have been surprised.

I could hear their supersonic language. My brain instantly translated it into Vasserian, and thus, into English. They talked just like us, but much faster. Talked about going to work, to their families, about the events of the day. The dramas of life. It crossed my mind that they might have a lab where they experimented on humans. My imagination knows no sacred boundaries, I say.

They built cities. Beautiful cities. And roads, both high and low. They had massive floating platforms with low walls that transported them everywhere outside of their running range. They ran about fifty to sixty miles per hour at a cruise, so that was impressive. They hopped up and down over 150 feet easily, old or young. And it seemed they had some unwritten rules about when it was okay to hop or not. No one collided in midair, and that was impressive considering how many hopping mice there were.

There were a million scents everywhere, many of them in various complex patterns which our noses picked up on. I didn’t know how important that was until later.

The society was hauntingly human. They had cops, and authority, and a pecking order. They had some type of money, but it wasn’t credit or cash or metal — it seemed to be some number held in a computer somewhere. They had computers, but those were different. Rigidly built to obey only mousey commands. And only to do one thing. Like the computer that kept track of one’s wealth. It was linked to all other computers, but only allowed to do that one thing. Hardwired for it. Incapable of doing anything else. Computers were built to purpose in each and every case.

They had scuffles, which, once begun and unmediated, ended up in a brief argument, and if that didn’t work, then some kind of weird and complicated what looked like rock-paper-scissors game, and if that didn’t work, we saw a few fights. They were over in seconds, these creatures being so fast, and hardly ever was blood drawn (that



would bring the cop mice... I can't believe I said that), and one mouse would always run off, the other running after them, biting their butt for good measure. But that rarely happened.

Mice had many interactions. They had families with many children. As many as twenty, growing up in homes that were both above and below ground. They had societal expectations, like all homes had one way in and one way out. Old habits die hard, I guess, unless the other race warring on them were a bunch of snakes or owls, which we had yet to discover. They ate entirely vegetarian diets, and grew most of their own food in huge gardens. All homes were built on a large parcel of land. Each mouse family had perhaps ten acres in the city. Much more in the country. They had thousands... Millions of subtle ways of communicating, from body language to some kind of strange, quiet empathy/telepathy we could link into... barely there, and I wasn't even sure they knew it existed. They had ways of eating, times, and places. They had cultural understandings up the wazoo, where all mice everywhere just knew that's the way it was and accepted it. The society seemed to have been around much longer than human culture, and yet their planet was not over populated, and with each mouse pair having up to twenty children, that was impressive. And as of yet, unexplained.

Their planet was rich in life, ten times the vegetation variety of Earth, and it was everywhere. They seemed to build things around it, rather than through it, like we did. They valued the nature of their home.

They chewed on everything, and though they used all kinds of tools (mostly held in their mouths, despite the opposable thumbs), they built their homes themselves and didn't have much use for chainsaws. They also defecated wherever they liked, as long as it was amongst plants, whenever they liked, and no one seemed to mind or take any offense. That would take some getting used to. Clean water was everywhere, and all of it was extremely clean (I could "read" the very molecules of it — Khelben called it *scanning* — just by looking). Food was to be had, but not as common as I expected. Mice gathered around large areas where food was available. They sat around eating various colored shapes of various sizes (and I assumed, flavors). When they sat eating, it seemed to be a rather private matter. They didn't chat or interact. After a few seconds we saw why. It seemed an acceptable social game to steal someone else's food. If you could. It happened occasionally, and was either taken as an excuse for a chase-fight, or a joke and a way to intermingle. Want a date? Steal their food.

Some of them, depending on social status, wore clothing, or uniforms, but most commoners couldn't afford it or didn't bother. They *did* style their hair, however, and again, it seemed to mostly denote status. The upper classes occasionally wore jewelry, seeming to like shiny objects, and had a level of technology to rival most science fiction scenarios. The law and military carried guns they mostly operated with their mouths, but some with their smaller hands. They carried any gear they had, as humans might use briefcases, on their backs. This sometimes required other mice to put them on or take them off off, as they couldn't reach their own backs, but in this society, it seemed a perfectly acceptable thing to do to ask strangers for help, even with personal things.

Most of them had jobs. We watched several thousand mice building military starships in one of the orbital stardocks. It was like watching blood race along a hundred arteries and veins. They moved so fast it was dazzling. And they knew right where they were going, exactly what they were doing. Each had a job to do, and they were all about it. We watched them build a 30,000-ton battle cruiser in a week. Unbelievable. Even their machines were designed to match their speed. These rodents hadn't slowed down by being human sized.

Everywhere we went, we saw a frightening similarity to humans and Earth — except for the shitty parts back home. These creatures had everything worked out down to the details. Their government was a hierarchy. There were mice in charge, ranks and statuses galore, and even very wealthy fat mice. Everyone unanimously accepted the system and the way it all worked. And it did work.

It seemed to be a near utopia. No pollution, no overpopulation, no toxins in their food or water, and no wars among themselves.

But there was a war.

From what we could tell, the war had never crippled their own planet. It had come close — to reaching their

star system, and even the moons had evidence of being hit by large explosions, but so far, it seemed like they had done a decent job of defending their turf. And it hadn't been going on that long. They were still ramping up to take it seriously. It seemed the higher ranks and upper government (whom we could listen in on at will) took it very seriously, and felt it was a grave, crucial threat, though we didn't know why. They were taking steps to increase the military a hundredfold. Millions of citizens were being recruited for the cause. The economy was booming more than ever in the history we could access. And while we heard there were areas that had been hit — factories, towns, and smaller urban areas not well protected by the defense system, but the population at large didn't seem too concerned. Yet.

We spent a few weeks looking and studying while Khelben spent almost all his time back aboard or near the crystal ship, insisting that it had no mind of its own, and must be defended lest we lose our way home. Zorians had ways of detecting crystal ships from a short distance, and the ship was too powerful a tool (weapon) to be left lying around.

“Good thing there aren't any Zorians around,” I said loudly. Khelben gave me the eye. I even saw some fear. It was no joking matter to normal Vasserians. Might as well run into a Christian church and start making jokes about Lucifer. He was dead serious. Even if the odds were a billion to one — and they probably were — he wasn't taking that chance. I made a note not to joke about it too often.

So most of the time we were on our own. And amazingly, the superior invisibility held even when he was not near the planet. He said it was something about the way he adjusted our frequencies that the universe read. Sure. Oh, is that all? Easy stuff.

Khelben parked the ship in the nearby asteroid belt, which was sometimes within telepathy range (about 300 million miles — we could always hear him, but he couldn't always hear us, even though our “transmitters” were physically the same, clearly our willpower wasn't) but often he was farther out than that. We were on our own. Avaril liked it. Karen thought it was like in the horror movie when people go off camera to investigate something. I was neutral, but secretly liked the freedom to make my own mistakes. As long as they didn't cost the planet or anything.

On with our professional assessment.

These beings were extremely intelligent. More so than humans, because it seemed that along with that intelligence, they incorporated wisdom and common sense. We became fascinated by every new thing we discovered. For three of us, it was our first contact with alien life. Even if it looked familiar.

However, they did have a dark side.

They had poor mice and the underprivileged. It seemed they were rather harsh on those who wouldn't pull their own weight. Most of them didn't survive, and the society seemed to refuse to care about that. When we didn't see many sick or injured mice, we wondered. When we couldn't find much in the way of medical facilities, we wondered harder. Finally, we saw a mouse who was ill fall off one of the lifts. He apparently had reached his limit, and just suddenly keeled over and fell, over a hundred feet. He was alive when he hit the ground, but not for long. There was a mouse back on the lift that leapt down to help him, perhaps a wife or friend, but it was too late. The other mice assessed the situation as the injured mouse struggled to get up, blood flowing out of his mouth, and then attacked. They tore him to pieces. It was relatively quick, but noisy and messy as hell. The wife/friend was in terror the entire time, not daring to intervene lest she be beset upon as well. He screamed. He tried to flee. But he didn't make it ten feet.

And that lit me off. I stepped forward, fists clenched, and before anyone could do anything to stop me, I sent my TK (telekinesis) into the bunch of them and expanded it as fast as I could, pushing them all off the victim and away, hurling some of them twenty feet. I was so angry I didn't even notice my TK had just managed to affect thousands of pounds instead of ten or twenty. I was going to do more but Khelben stopped me, a firm hand on my shoulder.

“No,” he said.

The dying mouse gave a few last choked gasps. His wife (my empathy activated along with my telepathy and I knew they were a mated pair) rushed to his side. He looked into her eyes as she tried to comfort him by licking his face, but he passed away and went limp as life left his body. The other mice, confused by my invisible intervention, went away. Some scared, but most simply as though they had stopped to take out the trash. Nothing more.

Then a few things happened. Karen gasped and straightened up. We looked at her. It snapped me out of my rage, though I spared a moment to glower at Khelben. I couldn't have saved the poor guy anyway. Those others, those common, random civilians passing by, had been too quick.

“I... I see something,” Karen said.

“Share it,” Khelben said.

“How?” she said.

“Open up and project it to our minds. Just be willing to share it. That's all it requires.”

Karen reached out and put her hands on me and Avril. It solidified the connection.

We were all focused on Karen anyway, so our empathy was set on her. We felt the mouse die, and we felt the emotional agony of his wife. Then we all saw, through Karens gifted eyes, a soft, elegant golden light rise from the body. It was a small, fragile thing, like a beautiful candle flame, slowly rising. We could feel its confusion, like that of an animal, just a bundle of feelings and energy.

We knew, as Karen did in that moment. This was the mouse's soul. Or what passed for it. It lingered there, over the body. It seemed unsure of what to do. We got no thoughts from it, no sentience as humans know it. Just a collection of feelings, rapidly shifting. It was going back over its entire life and everything it had felt in that time. It didn't take long.

The wife suddenly stiffened, and a spasm shook her body. At first we thought she was just suffering from racking grief, but then her face went slack. All the strength left her. She slumped over her husbands body, shuddered, and in a few moments, died.

Karens grip tightened.

“What the hell?!” I exclaimed, eyes wide.

Through Karen we saw her soul light rise as well. It joined the other. They danced around each other like fireflies. And waited.

Now mice were running away. They didn't have a problem with tearing a wounded mouse limb from limb, but they didn't like what just happened one little bit. That particular sidewalk became deserted in seconds. On board the slow—moving hover platform, there were two more deaths as it moved relentlessly on its way. Family members. We felt it. Their souls drifted down to the other two. Now there were four mice dead, and four softly glowing souls only we could see.

Many mice went about their business just as quick as they could, but some stopped, ears back, hunched over, looking worried. Waiting.

Was death contagious here?

I looked at Khelben. “What the eff?” I said.

He seemed genuinely puzzled. “I don't know,” he replied.

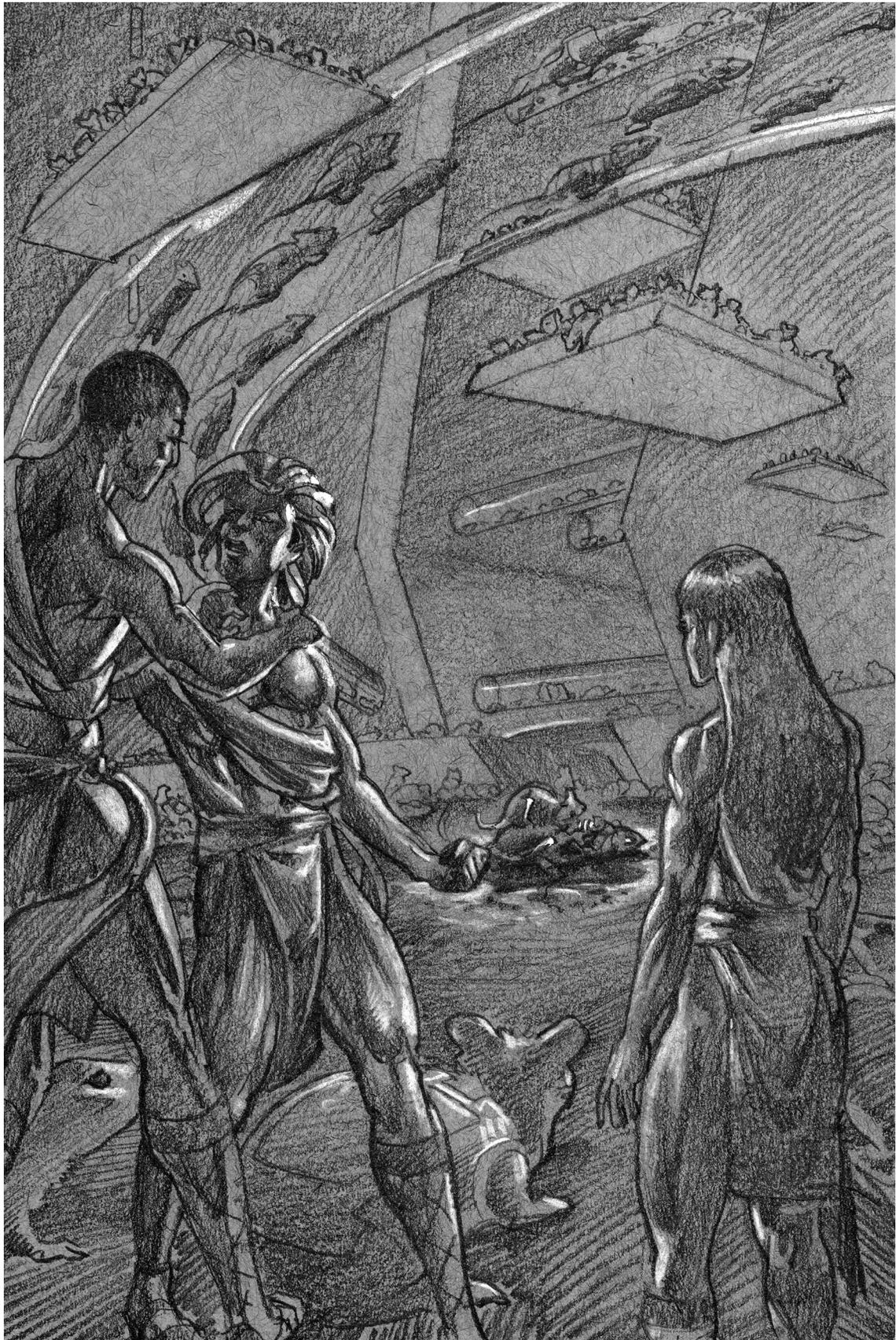
The four souls drifted off together, and got lost in the trees, fading even as they went.

Us four invisible people were left perplexed.

Eventually, robots came and cleaned up the bodies.

After things had returned to normal like nothing had happened, the first to open their mouth, was, of course, me.

“What the FUCK was that?” I said.



Avaril shook her head. "Sad."

"Yeah," Karen said. "It looked like she died from grief."

"It is possible," Khelben said. "Some creatures bond on a very deep level. Maybe she chose to die. Many races can do that as well."

"What about the lights?" I asked.

"Those are the seeds of unawakened souls," Khelben said. "I have seen them before, through the eyes of Milenah, a sister in arms of mine. She can see souls. It is a gift. Not many have it. It is extremely rare. In all my life, I know only three who can do it. Milenah, Actura, and now Karen. But I find it interesting that Kylla Kao, whose body you use, could not do it."

"Unawakened souls?" Karen said.

"Not aware of their own immortality. Just energy. Not sentient," Khelben said, impassive.

"You mean those mice had no afterlife?" I said, horrified. I was a very spiritual person, and always had been. The thought of a soul fading into non-existence was unacceptable to me. In fact, nothing was more terrifying.

"Not as you understand it," he said.

"What happens to them?!" I was almost yelling. It wasn't as if any of the natives could hear me.

Khelben turned to me. "I don't know. They return to the life field. Perhaps they go back to where they came from. No one, not even Actura, knows what happens after death."

"It's okay," Avaril said. "Maybe they're at peace."

"Maybe they're not!" I exclaimed. "Maybe everything they experienced in life just went *poof!* Gone. Like it never mattered. That's not okay!"

"I hope it is," she said. "I hope it's okay. I'd rather believe that than they just...went away. That's horrible."

"Damn right it is," I said.

"I don't see any free floating souls," Karen said, peering about. "I can't tell where they go or what happened to them. I don't see any others."

"What do 'normal' souls look like?" I asked. I was upset.

"Like the bodies they came from," Khelben said. "Because that is what they believe they look like. And they would be reachable through empathy and telepathy, to any Vasserian, or any being, sensitive enough. For a while. Then they, too, go somewhere else. But they go knowing who they are, and what they did in life. They take their experiences and memories with them." He saw that I was distressed. His eyes softened one micron. "This race hasn't reached the turning point of spiritual evolution, Jared," he said. "They probably won't reach it for another hundred thousand years. Which is a drop in an ocean of time. Your race went through this. Once, your soul was one of those lights. It returned to its source time and time again until it was strong enough to remember who it was. It is the natural order of things."

"Can't we... make that happen for them? Make their spirits evolve?" I said.

"Control freak much?" Karen said.

"*We* cannot," Khelben said. "And even those of us who might be able to, like Actura, *would* not. It would rob them of their own accomplishment." He looked back at the city of bustling rodents. "They need to do it on their own. Someday."

"What if they don't reach it? What if they don't live long enough to make the leap?" I asked.

He looked at me, matter-of-fact and cold again. "Then they start over, or fail."

"*Fail?*" I gasped. "Like, just... don't make it?"

"Yes," he said.

"And never exist again, just... gone," I said. Now I was breathing harder. I was really upset.

"Yes," he said, nodding slowly. He got that this meant a great deal to me.

I paused, paced around, shaking my hands at the air. I felt like stomping up and down and screaming. Finally,

though, my advanced body calmed me down sooner than I wanted to.

“Humans reached it before they went into space, didn’t they?” I said.

“Your souls are mature enough to be summoned by the Chronos Reactor,” Khelben said. “So, yes.”

“Why haven’t these... aliens made the jump?”

“Humans had help,” Khelben said. “A lot of help, from spiritual forces of various types, from what I know of your history. Prophets. Avatars. Messiahs.”

“Man!” I shouted. “Can’t we...”

“No,” Khelben said. “It doesn’t work. I’ve seen it tried a thousand times. They have to do it on their own.”

“Damn!” I yelled.

Avaril put her hand on me. It was a sympathetic feeling.

“This is just how things work, Jared,” she said. “It’s not wrong, it just is. Accept it and you’ll be happier.”

“You can just accept this?” I asked. She nodded. My God, where did that strength come from? Are some lucky people just born with it?

“You have plenty of strength too,” Karen said, hearing me. “Just in a different area than Avaril’s. I think we each have our own, unique strength. That’s why Vashtarr chose us.”

Avaril nodded.

I nodded a forced gesture back. There was nothing for it. I had to get myself under control. Something I used to be very good at, but not in recent years. I felt ashamed. I hated injustice. My definition of it, anyway.

“This has been going on for millions of years,” Khelben said. “And will go on for millions more.”

I nodded. Sometimes it’s just not possible to turn piss into lemonade before you have to drink it. Even for Alpha Knights.

