

CHAPTER 7

Quilah

We wandered around for a few more days. I didn't know what we were waiting for. My strategic problem-solving mind, along with Karen's gamer mentality and Avaril's go-get-em attitude got us into various discussions about how to end the war, how to "save" this race from the extinction it was supposed to be threatened by. Khelben was reasonably sure he could stop an earthquake, volcano, asteroid or something of that nature. But he admitted he might not stop a giant sun flare, a nuclear war (if they even had nukes), or a massive virus if it was quick enough. He had a hard limit to his abilities, even though they were well beyond ours. There were hundreds of scenarios. Millions. And we had no clue what was coming.

We saw more death. We saw more mice join in. I appeared that if a mouse was more than slightly wounded or ill, something that *might* not heal quickly, or they couldn't walk away from, they were massacred. If the injured or ill could fight back, sometimes they were let alone. The mice put their own to death — and often too quickly. It looked like pure animal instinct, and there was no rational qualification for this treatment that we could figure out. Then others would sometimes, at random, up and die if they held any emotional connection to the one killed. We finally gathered by listening that the phenomenon was called *The Leavetaking*, and it was just accepted, though not understood. They were too afraid of it to even study it. It had just always happened. They had diseases. They died from injury or old age (or your countrymen ripping you to shreds), but they had not the slightest understanding of *The Leavetaking*. And so neither did we. Khelben had shown us how to see as far down as molecules, and he could see atoms — but nothing obvious happened on those levels when one mouse decided to rush after another into death. It seemed to happen between mice who were close, but we witnessed it between total strangers on occasion. Which was why the mice ran away when one died, I guess. Fearful that they were next. It remained a mystery. And every time, Karen reported those soul lights rose up and then faded away. Into nothing, into nowhere. It bothered me every time. Clearly these animals... these people... had individual personalities. Why weren't their souls immortal? It wasn't fair.

Our wandering, fifty miles a day on foot, since we really didn't need to rest or eat or sleep, led us into an impoverished section of a large city called Dathriim. The city was a military base, with a massive starport on the ground and a matching one floating over it in orbit. Ships regularly ran up and down all day and night long. The nights were not very dark because of the nebula the solar system resided within. The temperature range within cities was regulated between sixty-five and seventy-five degrees, but outside civilization, it ranged as far as Earth or more. Here on the fringes of the city, there was no temperature regulation. We were walking through a slum.

A perfect slum it was. Poor, sick (who hadn't yet been killed for it for some reason), and crippled mice eked out a miserable existence. Not enough food, hard to find water. Not many plants (in other words, the bathroom was far away). No clothing or electricity. The nights were cold, and mice bunched up together in giant balls inside their one room huts/holes in the ground.

It was getting me down, although this Vasserian body and brain refused to experience a chemical down at first. It seemed as though my mind was convincing it when we came across a small group of young mice playing

by a stone hut. Normally I wouldn't have noticed, but these mice were special, and for some reason something in me knew it. My head turned as I walked by and stayed locked on them.

There were four of them, and they had some piece of brick or something to chew on. It was passing for a toy. They had rocks chewed to shape like starships, and they were playing a game of star combat. Three of them, A beige female mouse, a black and white boy who looked a bit like a cow in pattern, and a big, tall reddish colored boy played with the rocks, arguing which ships could do what and how the navy didn't have a battleship yet. Three cruisers could beat a heavy cruiser. Provided you won the rock-paper-scissors duel. They were into it. They had made up their own rules. Well, as it turned out, the tall one had made up the rules and used charcoal to write the details on the side of the hut. When it rained they had to cover it in time or rewrite everything when the rains stopped. It was the first evidence of writing I had seen yet, and they were on version 4.5 of their rules apparently. And three battle cruisers did end up beating a heavy cruiser, with one loss. They laughed about it and chewed the destroyed battle cruiser stone in half effortlessly. Yow. Strong, sharp teeth.

But then I saw the fourth mouse, and felt a pang of something in my chest. A small, hungry boy. An entirely white mouse, an albino, like the lab mice I worked with. Red eyes, lacking pigment. We hadn't seen any albino mice on this planet so far. And I wondered why. The gene was recessive, and so in the wild they would be rare, but these mice had the technology to make their coats any color they wanted — if not from birth, soon after.

He was quite skinny, and very young. All of them were, but he was the youngest. He was adorable. Big, wide eyes, perked ears, tail playfully sliding back and forth in the dirt as he played with the chew-brick, gnawing on it in glee. Though he was dirty, hungry, and tired, he was smiling, just having the time of his life with his simple toy.

Then he looked up, and right into my eyes. He almost continued his smile at me, but then caught himself.

I started. My feet stopped moving. His eyes were the deepest pools of ruby. And he saw me. He saw all of us. He dropped the brick. The tall one quickly snatched it up.

"Well, if you're done with it," he told the small albino.

The young boy gestured with his nose at us.

We looked at each other in alarm. We looked at Khelben.

"Don't look at me!" Khelben whispered in dismay. "He shouldn't be able to do that!"

"Mouse, what's with you?" the tall one said. "You look like you're Leaving. But we're all still here." He smacked the little mouse when he got no response. The little guy almost fell over from a casual swat. "Hey."

The little boy was horrified. His smile went away.

"I... I see Takers," he said.

"I see burning heavy cruisers," the cow mouse said. He was laughing wickedly at winning the game against the girl mouse. The girl appeared happy anyway, despite being dirty, poor, hungry, and losing her tiny fleet.

"It's alright," she mumbled.

"Nothing lasts forever," the cow mouse said as he removed the pieces from the playing field.

The tall mouse looked toward us, but past us. He could see nothing.

"You're sniffing the Chide," he said.

"No...!" the little one said. "I see...I see *Takers*!" He looked up at the tall mouse, who was twice as big. "Really!" He gestured with his nose again. "They're right there... Standing right there!"

"Hey," the tall one said to the cow mouse. "This mouse has lost it."

"He'd better get it together by the time my navy reaches his home base," Cowboy said. Yeah, I named him on the spot. Until I knew his real name.

"He's seeing things," the tall one said.

Cowboy looked away from his game, annoyed, at the little one. "What, for real?"

He saw the expression on the albino, whose eyes were wide with terror. His face became concerned. He rattled his tail and looked in our direction, then up and down the street. "Whatwhatwhat?" he said. "There's nothing



there!”

“Takers!” the albino whispered, pointing.

Now the girl looked up as well. She saw nothing, smelled nothing. She looked back down at the game.

“It’s okay,” she said.

None of them saw us but the white boy.

Avaril poked Khelben. “Slipping,” she said.

“Not so!” he defended himself. “My power is working just fine.”

“They’re *talking*,” the white mouse said. “About *powers*.”

Cowboy suddenly got concerned. He scattered the rocks.

“You win,” he told the girl. She beamed a broad smile. “Get him out of sight!” he ordered.

The tall mouse picked the albino up effortlessly in his teeth by the scruff of the neck and carried him inside.

We followed.

“Oh, no! They’re coming inside!” the albino squealed. “They’re after us!”

“Stop freaking out!” Cowboy said. “Everyone will tear you in half!”

The poor little guy was clearly scared out of his wits. He was shaking violently.

I looked at Avaril. “Takers?” I said. She shrugged.

“Mythology, it sounds like,” Khelben said. “See? Even by accident, it doesn’t go well. We need to leave.”

Well, enough of that.

I slowly approached the trembling mouse.

“Hey, little guy,” I said softly. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He shrieked. It was high pitched and deafening. We all jumped, and Karen ran out of the house with Khelben, holding her ears before she realized that Vasserian ears couldn’t easily be overloaded.

The albino’s two male friends put a blanket over his face. I couldn’t tell if they were trying to silence him or kill him. They had seemed to like him.

“Shut UP!” Cowboy said.

“It’s alright,” the girl said, a little disturbed.

Other mice, always curious creatures, were gathering outside the shacks doorless archway. The tall mouse jumped out at them violently, and they jumped back.

“Nothing to see here!” he shouted. He rattled his tail. They were defending their little friend. So not all of them killed the weak.

But Cowboy was a hyper, strong mouse, and the little one couldn’t breathe under the blanket. The screaming stopped. I went over and picked Cowboy up with my ghostly hand, really using TK, but either the illusion of the hand gave me as much strength as I actually had — which was plenty — or my power was getting stronger. Either way I effortlessly hurled Cowboy out the door into the back of the tall one. They both sprawled into a pile at the feet of the crowd. They stood up in a quarter second, afraid of being torn apart themselves. They crouched side to side, one forward, one facing the other way, ready to repel attackers. Their tails drummed furiously on the dirt street. Cowboy dared a confused glance back into the hut.

The albino got the blanket off his face and saw me and Avaril still standing there. He resumed screaming.

“We have to do something!” Avaril yelled over the sound. “They’re going to kill this group because of us!”

Sure enough, outside, I could feel the bloodlust taking over the crowd. Something different was wrong with these young mice... and they felt compelled to remove them from the gene pool. A snap decision was needed. I did the first thing that came to mind.

I reached down and picked up the young white lad by the scruff of his neck. It was like lifting a pillow. My TK was strong as ever, even against the gravity. He came right up.

I carried him outside, saying, “Look, I’m sorry — we’re your friends. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but we

are!”

Across the street, Khelben had his face in his hands, shaking his head, as he saw us emerge from the hut.

“Let it happen,” he told me.

“The hell with that,” was my answer.

Of course, what all the other mice saw was a screaming little mouse floating five feet off the ground, hovering ever closer to them. Cowboy’s eyes went buggy. The tall one dropped his jaw and jumped back into the crowd. The girl mouse stood there smiling, looking back and forth from the levitating albino to her friends, the crowd, and back. She didn’t mind. She looked amused.

Well, that was enough for the mice. The crowd was gone like yesterday’s news. They vanished instantly. The original four kids were all that was left. I slowly set the albino down. He kept screaming until he felt the ground and then his voice just kind of ran out. He looked around, bewildered, and saw us again. Two behind him, two across the street. He looked at his friends, who were looking at him as though he had just grown two more heads. Then he looked back to us. I saw his senses return. Khelben and Karen came back across the street. We stood around the little guy on all sides.

“Well, there goes the neighborhood,” Karen said.

“How’d you do that?!” Cowboy whispered.

“The Takers,” the little one said. “They’re all around me!”

“Lunatic!” the tall one said. “Madness has him.”

“Do it again,” Cowboy said, creeping forward, squinting.

I looked at Khelben.

“Your own judgement,” he said, “is what Actura told you. Unfortunately.”

“Oh, we’ve already stepped in it,” Avaril said, and reached down and picked up the albino. She slowly whirled him around in the air with her TK. “Wheeee!” she sang. “You’re flying!”

The little guy grinned against his will. He had a baby mouse’s cute face and an adorable smile.

His friends jumped back twenty feet. The girl still looked on, grinning. I wondered if she was simple.

“He... hehehe...” the albino giggled.

“Flying, flying, like magic mouse...” Avaril said, moving him around the street. “Where do you want to fly to next?”

“Hehehe!” he laughed. “Chase that mouse!” He pointed to Cowboy, who got a horrified look on his face. When his little friend floated toward him, he hopped back and sideways to avoid him. When his flying friend kept levitating after him, he dodged repeatedly, zipping from place to place with grace and ease, but the white floating boy followed, both he and Avaril laughing their asses off at the comical, terror-stricken face of Cowboy.

“What... what do we do?!” he asked the tall one.

The tall one, squinting and clearly assessing the situation with a decent intelligence, said, “Don’t panic.”

“Ummm... Yeah,” Cowboy said. “Right.” He stopped on a dime, and leapt on his little friend. Avaril’s TK was knocked free, and both mice tumbled to the ground.

The tall one piled on them both, and the girl decided to join in because that game was fun.

“They’re real,” the albino told them. “They’re real!”

Cowboy looked around now like he was concerned it might be true. Like a young lad looking into the dark after a story about demons. The tall one remained skeptical and wary.

“We’re not Takers, whatever those are,” I said. He looked right at me. I chuckled. He was so cute. “We’re...” I paused, looking at our guide. Khelben threw up his hands. “Aliens. From another planet. Here to help you.”

“Takers!” he said, and frowned adorably. His thin tail drummed on the ground.

“We’re here to help,” Avaril said gently, kneeling down beside him. She had a soft spot for animals. “We’re your friends.”



"What are they saying?" the tall one said. The albino relayed my words.

"What are your names?" Avaril asked the albino.

"We don't have names," he replied. "We are all Shunned."

She looked at me. "What does that mean?"

"It means we are outcasts from society," the tall one said when the albino relayed her words like some psychic medium. "Most of us because our parents died and we were not raised properly. Him because he was born with the wrong colors." He seemed to have some contempt for the fact, and I felt genuine love for his friends.

"There are no albino mice on your planet?" I asked.

"Mice?" The tall one drew back, alarm on his face. "Maybe they *are* Takers." He and Cowboy exchanged worried glances. He composed himself. "We are Murines. *Mice* is a derogatory term, Sir. Ma'am. Whatever. We use it as slang and a cuss word, because we are supposed to be street Murines. Mice were an inferior species from long ago in a place long gone now."

"Excuse us," Khelben stepped in. "We meant no offense."

"We call each other that all the time," Cowboy said. "It's no big deal. That mouse," He jerked a thumb (mice with thumbs... wasn't used to it) at the tall one, "Just has foolish dreams of one day being civilized."

"No big deal," the girl echoed. "It'll be alright."

"We're here to do an important job," I said, and immediately regretted it. Khelben's face was one for the books.

"*Do not tell them*," he sent to me telepathically.

"*Why not?*" I replied. "Hey," I said out loud. "Promise not to tell anyone about us and we can talk honestly."

When the albino told his friends that, they reluctantly agreed.

"We'd be killed for sure," Cowboy said. "We're not saying anything!"

I looked at my companions. Khelben looked perturbed, like he was becoming pressurized. Karen and Avaril thought about it and nodded.

"Just these mice," Karen said. "No others."

"Murines," Avaril said. "And yeah, okay. No others."

I looked at Khelben. He looked back, his gaze a clear warning of us being on thin ice.

"If I have to deliver orders to any of you," he said, pointing, "You'll know it." He put down the finger. "Until then, Actura trusted you. Vashtarr trusted you. My faith may be blind, but I shall attempt it as well."

Fool! The thought escaped my undisciplined mind. He got that it was a joke, but it made a crease appear in his brow.

"Okay, first off, names," I said. "Cowboy. And... Lily. And..."

"Hali," the tall one interrupted when the albino was relaying our words almost in real time. "I always wanted to be named after my father."

"Okay, Hali it is," I said. I looked at the small albino. He was finally smiling again, his cheeks puffed out, his crimson eyes glittering, enjoying being important for once. I felt for him. I wasn't so different when I was young. I had been a sad, lonely child. All I'd wanted to be was..."

"Happy," I said. "Happy Mouse."

It just came to me.

"Quilah Laoshu," Avaril said.

I felt that pang in my chest again, like fate poking me. *Deja Vu*.

"What?" I asked.

"Happy Mouse in Chinese," she said. "Quilah Laoshu."

"You speak Chinese?" I said

"And French, and Japanese, and Russian."

“Dang.” I looked back at the little boy, eagerly awaiting his name like it was the best gift in all the world.

“Quilah Laoshu it is.”

I wondered if he would be insulted, but clearly not even a little bit. His face was priceless. He lit up like a poor boy who had just gotten everything he ever wanted for Christmas.

We all did.

