

CHAPTER 12

The Battle of Red Sector Fifteen

We ran to the bridge. Quilah came with us, and Hali joined us along the way, racing down the halls at top speed. Lily saw us run by the galley and followed, moving her bulk in a surprisingly adept way.

Half of them weren't allowed on the bridge. When we arrived, Hali took his spot next to the science station. Lily and Quilah just stood there. We, of course, were invisible. Alerts and red lights were everywhere. The bridge, perhaps fifty feet across, with fourteen mice manning (mousing) it, was fully lit up. Across from the captain's perch, four mice ran the ship crouching or laying down, the massive screen showed deep space. But on the navigator's panel, three red lights approached.

"What the Taker's hell are they doing here?!" Captain Froshnel bellowed, glancing back at Quilah and Lily. "Remove yourselves from the bridge!" he ordered them.

Lily tucked her chin and backed up into the hall. Quilah refused and didn't move. He wanted to be with his friends through the danger.

"They're with me," Hali attempted, though halfway through the ruse he knew it was pathetic.

"A janitor and a cook are with the senior intelligence officer," Froshnel scoffed. "Nice try, Lieutenant Commander. I know all about your friends. Security!"

"Please, Sir!" Quilah pleaded. "I won't be in the way! I just want to be with my friends!"

"I don't give two shits about what you want, Recruit! You are taking up space on my bridge in a hostile event! You're going to the brig and staying there!" The captain yelled.

Mice are pretty fast. The security with red uniforms and two black stripes each showed up in under a minute while Quilah continued his pleas. The captain ignored him.

"Their trajectory is turning toward us, Sir," the navigator said. "Closing at 5,000 meters a second and climbing."

Security dragged Quilah and Lily roughly out of the bridge. The door shut behind them. They raised their shock clubs to beat my friends and before they could land a blow I slammed them into the walls of the hallway so hard it knocked them out cold.

"I'm going to try this," I said. I attempted to shift them into the invisible frequency. Khelben had this down as a gift. He didn't even have to expend any concentration. For me, my powers had grown, but this was difficult. My mind had to keep track of the subtle shifting frequencies every second and adjust them in relation to every other frequency in the environment. There were thousands. I managed to make them mostly invisible. I wasn't sure about sound.

"Stay quiet," I told them, and opened the door. Everyone on the bridge was preoccupied with what was on the screen and didn't notice the two invisible mice enter.

With good reason.

On the massive monitor empty space had been replaced with a zoomed image of three starships. Each one twice the size of the *Quick Tooth*, and with at least five times the weaponry that I could see. They were sharp,

angled, black ships, with blood red highlights and dangerous ramming bows. One could not help but notice the heavy armor on them. They looked like guns mixed with human navy ships gone wrong and bristling with menace. They were closing on an intercept course fast, and had already launched ten missiles.

“Impact in fifteen seconds,” Cowboy shouted, doing his job.

“Sharp to Port! Weapons officer, fire for effect to stop those missiles!” the captain ordered.

Cowboy had been trained for this, and had trained hard, but he was new, and his aim was only great in practice. As the ship banked hard to the left, he hit several of the missiles with his many gun batteries, but missed three. Cowboy got one at the last second; the ship shook and was pushed out of the way of the other two. The bridge crew cheered. Mice got into their drama. Cowboy was grinning ear to ear.

“Spin up the jump drive,” the captain said. “Turn us around. Full retreat.”

“We’re within range of their weapons now, Sir!” Cowboy exclaimed. “If we turn around we’re going to take damage!”

“We’re outnumbered and outgunned, Ensign!” the captain replied. “Don’t question my authority again or I’ll have you removed!” He turned sharply to the navigator. “Do as I command. Full retreat.”

So the ship spun on its X and Z axes and turned to flee. As the older jump drive shook the ship and powered up loudly, they sped to gain distance until it was ready to go.

Cowboy was right. They were well within range. They never stood a chance.

Arcing red beams of light sprang forth from the black ships. Only ten percent hit the fast Murine vessel, but that was plenty. The engines were struck dozens of times. They stopped working, and the ship lost its gain in momentum, staying at the speed it had reached so far. Which was not enough.

The maneuver engines were disabled, but the jump drive was their main target. It was completely offline. It made sad churning sounds as it spun down to its death.

Sure enough, one of the mice echoed that result. “Engines offline, Captain! Casualties and fire in engineering decks three through eight.”

The ship quaked with explosions. Thirty missiles followed the beam attack. The enemy was gaining slowly. The black battle cruisers let thirty more follow the first salvo. Sixty missiles.

Cowboy laid into the control panel like a kid trying to beat his high score. He unleashed every weapon they had, including their own missiles as interceptors. It wasn’t going to be enough, and all of us knew it.

“We need to *do something!*” Avaril said.

“We know how the ship works,” Karen said. “I’ll go to engineering and get the maneuver drive going again if I can.”

“Avaril and I will try to protect the ship,” I said. I thought I might have even sounded a bit confident.

Karen tessered away. I felt my telepathic link with her reappear at the back of the ship. She was surrounded by fire, smoke, and dead bodies. She looked through the smoke, into the molecular structure of the engine and I felt her mind go to work, figuring out how to get the ship moving again. She put her hands on the burning engine bulkheads and began to matter manipulate a repair. But it wasn’t going to be fast. We weren’t that good at matter manipulation yet.

Avaril tessered outside the ship, out front by a thousand yards. I was alarmed at first, wondering if she could survive space, but that woman was no dummy. She knew what she was doing. She had her powers down as good as they could be. And I had other things to worry about. Like keeping the bridge crew alive.

Cowboy couldn’t see Avaril, and was firing right through her; she couldn’t be hit because of the phase effect. I felt her focus her mind to a razor point and stretch her hands out before her. Then she turned sideways, her right facing the oncoming missiles and her left toward the ship. On the screen I saw her stance — like a regal ballet dancer, back arched, shoulders squared, head slightly down and determination on her bronzed skin. She began to glow. Her entire body lending itself to her power. Her mental focus was so strong it helped me and Karen with

ours.

Each missile Cowboy missed Avaril tessered past the ship. At least one every second. I was in awe. Those missiles had mass. At least five times that of one of us. They were extremely complex machines, full of complicated, widely varied molecular structures, and they were moving at extreme velocity. All making the tesseract a feat, even at close range.

Cowboy got half of them. Avaril got almost all the rest. I reached out, whatever Vasserian equivalent of adrenaline ramping up my TK strength, and slapped three more aside from hitting the ship. Two got through. One was a direct hit.

I turned my TK on the bridge, but it wasn't enough. I made my shields strongest around Quilah, Lily, and Cowboy — but I had to separate them to do that. Not a trick I had tried before. I tried to protect everyone, but the explosions and thousands of moving pieces of shrapnel were too much for me to keep track of. The captain and his two nearest officers were struck and died immediately. Five more were seriously wounded, and two of those had been close to the captain. The Leavetaking got them seconds later. They seized up and keeled over. To their credit, the remaining mice stayed at their posts instead of running. Still, not a great racial trait in wartime. The only mice unscathed were the three I directly protected.

But in the event, like an idiot, I had forgotten to protect myself.

Khelben's phase held, and everything passed right through me. Had it not, I would have been very dead. One little mistake. Everything happened so fast.

"It's just your human mind thinking it's limited by the speed of events!" Avaril sent to me. *"You aren't! Let go and all of this will happen like hours instead of seconds!"*

My mind held perfect focus. I wasn't dazed, stunned, or in shock. I tried to slow down my thoughts. That didn't work. I tried to slow down time. That didn't work either. Less than a second had passed.

"Just relax!" Avaril sent.

I'd had a problem with that the last several years. My damage from Earth was inhibiting my performance as an Alpha Knight. How stupid.

I'm not even human anymore. None of my issues matter.

I stood up straight and looked down at Quilah, who was terrified. He looked back at me and managed a nervous smile. Lily's eyes were bulging, and she wasn't smiling anymore. She was cringing around Quilah, trying to protect him with her body. Cowboy hadn't budged from his post. He was still firing for all he was worth. Reload missile racks, fire again. Recharge beam weapons, fire again. I could feel him wanting the ship to turn around so he could use the particle cannon, their most powerful weapon.

"I can't be hurt," I sent to Avaril. Well, to everyone through the link.

"That's right!" Karen sent back.

"I can feel you, Jared!" Avaril sent. *"I know you're one of the bravest men our world has to offer. Vashtarr knew it. Actura knew it. Now use it!"*

I stretched my hands out and sent my TK shield all around the bridge. I felt it expand. I sent it further. I had felt the explosion. I knew how much strength to put into each section of it. Time seemed to slow way down. I could see an explosion coming like slow ink expanding in water now. I could block pieces and parts of the explosions and prevent them from hitting crucial areas, which, thanks to Khelben, I had memorized. I knew the entire ship in my forward section. I could see it, feel it. I just *knew* it. I knew every molecule. I knew what was damaged and what wasn't. What needed repair. I knew where every crew member was on every forward deck. I had the front quarter of the ship covered. Now all I had to do was not question any of it.

"Second in command!" Cowboy shouted.

"Dead!" the communication officer shouted back.

"Third in command!" Cowboy yelled.

“Dead!” Hali shouted. “By my authority as Lieutenant Commander, I place Cowboy in charge of this ship!” He stared hard at the remaining crew. “Captain?!”

Cowboy didn’t miss a beat. He leapt over the rail and into the captain’s chair.

“By the Beholden, get my engines fixed right this damn second!” he shouted. He was talking to us.

“Something’s happening here,” the Chief Engineer replied over the intercom from engineering. “Too much smoke! But something weird... Something weird is happening, Sir!”

“Yalli — you’re in navigation!” Cowboy ordered. “Murismie, you’re at weapons! Hali, take the science officer’s station and second in command!”

The mice jumped to obey.

The communications officer said, “Sir, the Atraxian battle cruisers are closing on us. Their beam weapons are rechar—”

The Atraxian cruisers fired.

Avaril tried. She tessered chunks out of the light beams, but it wasn’t the same as deflecting them. A tesser occurs in the tiniest fraction of a moment — less than a trillionth of a second. The beams were continuous. They went right through her attempt. She tried using TK, but none of us had TK near powerful enough to bend light. The beams hit the rear of the ship again. The ship was blown end over end, tumbling on its unchanging course.

“Charge the particle cannon!” Cowboy said.

Officer Murismie obeyed. “Charged, Sir!”

This entire time, Hali stood his post, intensely studying incoming data.

Cowboy missed the first flip past his targets. The Atraxians launched another missile salvo. On the second pass, he guessed with Murine speed the timing.

“On three, FIRE!” he said. “One... Two, THREE!”

The weapons officer fired their main cannon. It was a clean shot. It disintegrated most of the missiles, and went through to score a direct hit on the center Atraxian cruiser. The cruiser veered off to one side, striking the side of the cruiser in formation next to it, which took light damage.

Avaril tessered the remaining missiles around, and aimed them back at the battle cruisers.

“Don’t know why I didn’t think of that the first time” she sent.

“Karen,” I sent, *“How’s engineering?”*

“Managed to protect the important parts from the explosion,” she replied. *“It’s a mess. Give me one more minute!”*

“You’ve got ten seconds, Scotty!” I replied.

Cowboy would have waited for the next flip of his crippled ship, but the trajectory wasn’t perfect, and there wouldn’t be a shot.

The Atraxians were stunned and confused for the moment. They had to destroy their own missiles. Cowboy used the time.

“Listen, everyone! We aren’t just going to survive this! We are going to punish those bastards for killing our captain! They must pay! WE are the ones out here to be afraid of! WE are the predators! *They* need to be afraid of *us!* Are you with me?!”

The mice cheered, rattled their tails, and hopped in their seats. They bared their teeth. Their eyes took on a hard gaze. Cowboy was at the top of his game. His energy was feeding everyone on the bridge. Even me.

“Then let’s make those assholes pay!”

At that moment, the engines came back online. The bridge lights brightened considerably. The life support came back on and the smoke began to filter out the vents.

“Hard to port!” Cowboy shouted.

The move took the Atraxians by surprise, and their next round of beam weapons missed entirely. They dared

to fire more missiles. Avaril showed them the error of their ways. They took heavy hits this time. The cruisers were much closer, and almost within range of Avaril's tesseract. Was I imagining things, or did that range double in *just* this combat so far?

Cowboy spun the ship, light and agile by its design, around behind the Atraxians. He got behind one, and didn't hesitate.

"Light them up!" he ordered.

"Sir!" Murismie fired all weapons. Missiles, beams, and the particle cannon at near point-blank range. The cruiser took the hits and was crippled. It began to roll and tumble in space. Its light flickered and went out.

"Again!" Cowboy ordered while the other two cruisers were maneuvering to get behind the *Quick Tooth*.

They waited one full cycle to recharge while the other two ships almost reached position. If the bridge crew was sweating, they didn't show it.

"Fire!" he ordered.

The second barrage destroyed the cruiser completely. It lurched, shuddered, and then bulged grossly before coming apart in violent flames which were immediately extinguished by the vacuum of space. Bodies of black, twisted things along with thousands of tons of debris flew in every direction. Hali watched with intense eyes, studying every fraction of a second.

"Enemy destroyed, Sir!" Murismie yelled. The crew cheered. It might have been the very first Atraxian ship ever destroyed by the Murines.

"Hard to starboard!" Cowboy yelled. "Drop the nose fifty degrees!"

The ship dove into a desperate dodge. They still took some hits from beam weapons. The ship was in bad shape. Karen was repairing as fast as she could. She was mentally exhausted. More so than either Avaril or I, and we were draining our power fast.

The engines gave a cough, but kept going. Murismie fired rear missiles and beam weapons once they were a few degrees lower so as to not hit their own weapons. The slightly damaged cruiser and the one unharmed gave chase, but they weren't as agile. Still, they pummeled the *Quick Tooth* with weapons fire, and scored hits. Our ship was coming apart much faster than we could hold it together.

Cowboy ran the ship as hard as it would go. Firing back, he spun, twisted, dodged, sped up and slowed down, just like watching mice fight. He used every trick in the book he could think of, and some Avaril and I suggested. It was still a losing battle.

"Jump drive online, Sir!" the navigator declared.

"Spin up!" Cowboy ordered. "Plot a course one sector over, course zero-two by eighty-eight, by fifteen."

"Sir?" the navigator said, face shocked.

"Do it now, Yalli." Cowboy said.

"Sir!"

"*Avaril!*" I sent.

A moment later, she tesserated back aboard.

The course was charted and the heavily damaged ship jumped. It made all kinds of disturbing noises as it did, but it did.

Cowboy turned to the crew once in jump.

"The Beholden have blessed our ship," he told them. They looked at him strangely. Mice had no religion. He was creating it on the spot out of necessity, but it was working. The men held steady. "We are *not* retreating! We are taking the fight somewhere we can win. All crew to repairs. Get this ship as tight as possible in the short time we have."

"Sir," the navigator said. "The Atraxians have followed us into jump."

"Of course," Cowboy said. "They have no idea what we're up to, running toward their homeworld. It's worried

them.”

Holy crap. He was jumping right into the system of Atrax itself.

No one could say that mouse didn't have a pair.

“What are your plans, Captain?” Hali asked.

Cowboy turned to his brother and an evil grin broke out on his face.

“I'm going to kill those sons of sewage if it's the last thing we do,” he said. “For Captain Froshnel.”

Well so much for “we are a very forgiving race.”

The crew cheered again and rattled their tails. Hali nodded, and seemed to understand it was useless to argue. He had placed Cowboy in charge for his charisma and his tactical genius, and trusted him completely.

The ship would be in jump only two hours. Myself and the other Knights had to enter meditative trances twice for twenty minutes each, and eat parts of the ship to keep our energy up, but we repaired as much as we could. We even managed to improve a few things. Avaril was well schooled in physics and engineering. Karen knew some tricks from role playing games. I was ridiculously creative and couldn't ever manage to think *inside* the box. We made stuff work. We made stuff up and improved things. We made the ship more dangerous.

The ships were hot on our tails (pun intended) when we came out of jump. They were just moments behind us. Cowboy used those moments to turn the ship around and race backward toward one of the system planets.

“Main sequence star,” Hali reported. “Fourteen planets, ten inhabited. Two asteroid belts — one outermost, and well within reach. The planet coming up has a Vibron gas atmosphere, four gravities, three moons, and a ring of ice.”

Cowboy noted all of it.

“Head for the ice ring, then into the atmosphere at a reverse dive,” he said. “Let's see if their ships are streamlined.”

“Contacts coming in all across the scanner,” navigation said. “There is a starbase one planet in. They're launching ships.”

“Good, they know we're here. Wonder why, stillbirths. Wonder why?”

“One of the ships is registering at 250,000 tons, Sir,” Hali said. I heard several crew members gasp. One whistled.

“A battleship,” Cowboy said, keeping his voice calm. “Looks like they have a battleship. Bastards. We don't have one. Scan away, Hali.”

Hali did, recoding as fast as he could.

When the other two battle cruisers came out of jump, and found Cowboy's ship already pointed at them, they immediately ate damage. Cowboy fired on them at close range, and scored direct hits on both ships. One ship took it from the particle cannon, and multiple interior explosions could be seen pulsing through the windows, which blew out seconds later.

The *Quick Tooth* spun and dove toward the planet surface nose first.

“Contact with the incoming fleet in five minutes,” navigation said.

“Steady the dive,” Cowboy ordered.

The ship dove and the Atraxian battle cruisers came after us, one heavily trailing smoke. We went through the ice ring. Our ship had enough agility to dodge the floating icebergs. The Atraxians took more damage, despite their heavy armor. It was hair raising. Cowboy was pouring on the speed.

Pieces and parts came flying off their ships and ours. Our ships became heated and lit on fire like meteors. The fire ignited the atmosphere, and a huge plume of bright violet flame erupted behind our ship, engulfing the enemy. They endured it and kept after us, firing into our backside. We fired back.

“Solid ground in eight seconds,” navigation said.

“On my mark, sharp bank,” Cowboy said. “And fire missiles... Now!”

Missiles were fired to the rear, into the flame and the blind enemy. As the missiles detonated against the hulls of the battle cruisers, Cowboy pulled the ship up as steeply as he could, missing the ground by less than a mile while traveling at over fifty miles per second. It was a feat of timing and piloting skills. The navigator was up to the task. The first Atraxian ship was not. It hit the ground and a massive explosion resulted, also igniting the atmosphere, and swallowing the last ship.

The *Quick Tooth* came surging out of the gas atmosphere and up toward the north pole of the planet.

“Contact with the fleet in three minutes,” navigation said.

“We have no idea what their weapon range is,” Hali said.

“Turn the ship ’round. Reverse course 180,” Cowboy said. He wasn’t taking chances. He wanted every last Atraxian that had tested him and the ship.

His hunch was right on. The last Atraxian ship came spiraling up from the gasses like an angry, wounded dragon, wreathed in violet fire and into the orbit of the ringed planet. Cowboy let them have it. Several shots missed. The particle cannon scored a partial hit. The starboard side of the ship was blasted open. Atraxians spewed forth into violet flames and then space.

“Eat it,” Cowboy said, grinning like a demon, then turned to the navigator. “Take us out — into the asteroid field,” he commanded.

Nav obeyed, and the ship lurched on its last legs away from the planet and the incoming fleet in a broken, evasive line.

The Atraxians followed, gaining speed and firing. They missed most shots, and then fired a salvo of missiles. They fired all of them. Sixty missiles, their entire remaining arsenal. The missiles gained speed and would rapidly catch us.

Avaril tessered outside the ship again, and locked herself to the top of the hull with TK. She faced the oncoming battle cruiser.

“Sir, I’m getting strange readings from these missiles,” Hali said. “I’ve not seen this before.”

“What do you mean?” Cowboy said.

Hali looked up from his console, worried. “I don’t know what I’m looking at.”

The missiles were almost upon us. The weapons officer was firing as fast as he could with what remained of his weapons batteries. Most of them had been burned off the hull by the violet fires. He launched counter missiles of his own. Again, not enough. We were going to take hits.

“*Scan the missiles,*” Karen sent forward to us. “*You’re better at that than I am.*”

Avaril had her mind busy swatting missiles. They were traveling so fast by the time they were in range of her tesseract, she would only be able to get a few.

I reached out to scan, but they were too far away for me to tell anything. So I scanned the console of Hali instead. I read what he was reading. I understood it, but couldn’t believe it, so I sent it to Avaril, which interrupted her thinking, but I had to be sure.

The missiles were seconds to impact. There were still three on course.

“*Nukes!*” Avaril yelled telepathically, and tessered back inside, in place, holding onto my right arm. “*Use my strength!*”

I knew what she meant. I reached out, with her aiding my mind, and ran a huge wall of TK across the incoming missiles, smashing them aside. I used another wall between them and the ship, and the last one around the ship itself. The entire ship.

“Brace for...” Cowboy got half out.

The missiles detonated.

The screen went white.

The ship was tossed like a burning paper cup in a hurricane. Right into the asteroid field. The gravity

compensators buckled. Between the shockwave and the impacting asteroids, and no seatbelts, every mouse on the ship took a collision at the equivalent of a 70 mile per hour car wreck. Half the crew died. Avaril, I, and Karen were hurled out of the ship through the walls, by the nature of the frequency shift we all shared. Quilah and Lily came with us. What happened to the bridge crew we had no idea. From outside the ship, we could see its entire stern was melted. Its armor was fused to its hull. No weapons remained visible. Even the windows had melted steel over them. The ship was tumbling headlong into giant rocks, smashing into them at high velocity. It was being beaten to a pulp, bouncing off the bigger ones, being hammered by the smaller ones.

We had to act fast. Avaril was on it. She grabbed the mice and tessered them back into the ship before the vacuum of space could kill them, surrounded by what little TK strength she had left. Karen tessered back into engineering.

And I got angry.

That blast had probably just killed all of us. We were way too close. I lost it. I reached around near me, and even bereft of Avaril's power, I hurled a house sized asteroid at the Atraxian ship. Fast. Without gravity to inhibit me, it went *really* fast. Then another. Then another, and then five more at once. I saw myself through Avaril's eyes as she checked on me with a glance. My halo had risen around my head. I was blazing in chromatic light. I felt the universe bending to my will. And all that will was bent to the destruction of that ship.

It took impact after impact. It still came on. It intended to ram us, and finish us off. I hit it again, harder. Again, harder still. I sent an asteroid the size of a foot ball stadium into its hull and straight through. Still it came. I reached deep inside for yet more raging power.

"Deflect the angle!" Avaril sent.

At the speed of Vasserian thought, moments before impact, I understood. I formed a wedge with my TK pointing out behind us. The ship hit that wedge like the side of a massive wall, groaned along it, sparks flying into space, turned off trajectory and missed the tumbling *Quick Tooth* by only several yards. The Atraxian battle cruiser, now dead anyway, careened off into the asteroid field and ran headlong into a small moon sized rock. It exploded.

I tessered back into the bridge. I was completely spent. I felt barely able to stand, and thinking was difficult. Slow. Human.

Avaril held the atmosphere in check with TK, but she was shaking.

Quilah was bleeding from his nose, eyes and ears. Lily also. Their eyes were completely bloodshot with ruptured vessels, but they were alive.

The bridge looked like several trains had crashed through it at full speed. Twisted, bent metal, wires, sparks, fire, smoke and debris littered everything. It reminded me of a scene after a bad tornado coupled with a catastrophic earthquake.

Cowboy was down in the ruins, and so was Hali. Probably dead. Our TK had been taken from them when the impact hit. Some of the bridge crew was alive, but broken and badly wounded.

Quilah was racked with tremors. His face was covered in frozen tears, and both he and Lily's backsides were crusted with frozen yellow ice. They had pissed themselves. They both looked horrified beyond what they could cope with. I felt instant regret. With my ironclad Vasserian brain, capable of dealing with intense levels of stress, I had not accounted for the trauma of such things to a normal being. A human would be going insane — or at least have PTSD for the rest of their lives by now. My heart was breaking open with sympathy, and I had just begun to understand what Khelben was warning us about, when a most miraculous thing happened. Literally.

Lily was terribly frightened, and was crying. Her tears were mixed with blood that was flowing from her eyes. Her blood vessels had ruptured harder than Quilah's, apparently. I scanned her body and saw it clearly. She was bleeding to death. Inside her skull, the damage had been too much. She had lost all of her usual carefree demeanor. She was dying and didn't know it.



When Quilah snapped out of his horror, looked at his suffering friend, and put himself over her back, hugging her, laying his cheek down on the back of her head. He closed his eyes. A look of peace and tranquility came over his face as it relaxed. Perhaps he was just trying to comfort her, but the bleeding stopped. Just stopped. She looked surprised, then stopped shaking. Then she smiled. Her eyes returned to their normal violet color.

Quilah just lay there on her, sobbing, saying he was sorry. As if the whole thing was his fault. He sounded like he was sleepwalking.

My jaw was open. My eyes couldn't blink. Avaril was the same. We looked at each other, then back at Quilah, who looked half dead, half like he was meditating. I scanned Lily. It was like the damage had never happened.

"Q... Quilah!" I said.

"I'm sorry, this was so stupid! It was a mistake!" He went on mumbling, eyes closed, face slack, hugging Lily. "All this violence is so terrible! It won't ever solve anything! It's just needless destruction!"

"QUILAH!" I yelled.

But he wouldn't snap out of it. He was in some sort of trance.

"It's okay," Lily said, chipper as can be.

Then, a sound of crunching metal, and from the far end of the bridge, Cowboy pushed a beam off his legs. They had been crushed, broken in dozens of places and useless. He was crawling over to Hali using his arms.

"Navigator!" he yelled, his voice hoarse from smoke.

The navigator pulled himself back up to his cracked console. Some of it was still working.

"The battleship and its escorts..." he wheezed. His lungs had been punctured by a piece of flying shrapnel. "Firing range in one minute... Sir."

"Get — Get our engines working!" Cowboy ordered at the air. He was trying to unbury Hali, using his teeth to drag heavy machinery off his limp friend, but he didn't have the leverage without the use of his rear legs.

"Karen!" I sent feebly.

"*I'm working on it,*" she sent back, also weak. "*Jared, there's radiation everywhere. Mice are dying from it every minute. I can see it. It's... melting their bodies slowly. Some will die now, some will die in hours, but they're all dead. We might be, too. I don't know.*"

"I'll hold the air in," I said to Avaril. "Get down there and fix engineering."

She had to run. Tessering was out of the question. As she left the bridge, I put up a thin, wavering TK shield, forced my will to make it strong enough, and hoped Avaril would be able to get to engineering on foot. The ship was trashed beyond repair.

I turned back to give Quilah instructions, but he didn't need them. None of us know to this day how he did it, but he healed everyone on that bridge. With his eyes closed. Cowboy was first, and as his ruined legs returned to him like balloons filling with air his face was a mask of awe and confusion. Hali, upon being touched, sat up and pushed the machinery off him as if he was annoyed by being held down. The navigator was healed, the shrapnel in his lungs ejecting itself. The weapons officer was healed of his mortal wounds, as were many others. The dead remained dead, but Quilah healed everyone with a heartbeat.

Before our very eyes, Quilah came into his own power. And he did so the entire time never healing himself. Still bleeding. Still shaking. And unconscious.

We didn't have time to question it.

By the time it was over, we had ten seconds. Quilah stood there next to me, asleep, blood trickling out his ears, eyes, and nose.

"They're firing missiles," the weapons officer said, relieved of his broken back and arms.

I looked. More nukes. Hundreds of them.

"We have no weapons," Murismie said. "No armor. No maneuver capability."

Cowboy jumped down to the floor. He faced the open hole in the hull where the screen had been. No one

on the bridge understood what was happening. Why they were still alive when the wall was gone. How they had been healed. All of them were in a severe state of shock.

But not Cowboy.

He glared out the hole into space at the oncoming massive fleet. They were almost on us, carving their way into the asteroid field with thousands of beam weapons like a cat digging out a bird nest. That battleship was a relentless monster, coming forward and ignoring hundreds of massive rocks it hit on its black, armored hide. Behind it, some thirty other warships, all of them bigger than the battle cruisers had been. There was even a carrier launching fighters. And ahead of it all, the missiles bearing down on us, dodging asteroids, seeking us out like hungry serpents. My stupid Alpha Knight brain knew they would hit in twelve seconds. No computer needed.

Hali stood there, stoic, eyes studying every detail to the last.

Cowboy gave them a show of his teeth with a straight tail pointed out behind him. The mousey equivalent of the finger, I guess.

Nine seconds.

“It’s been a pleasure serving with you, Gentle Murines,” he said. “And rest knowing we got those bastards back.”

Six seconds.

“Nothing lasts forever,” Cowboy said.

Then the ship lurched to life, the hull shuddering and rolling back into its steady trajectory. It missed a massive asteroid by a quarter mile, sailing over its surface, trailing smoke and parts. The engines were back online.

Three seconds.

Cowboy snapped his head over at the navigator. The officer piloting the ship needed no orders. He didn’t even put in coordinates. He just pushed the jump button.

And we were gone.



