

CHAPTER 24

A Dream of Mice

I woke from a coma so deep that my blood took an hour to begin moving in my veins again. I was freezing. I tossed and turned in my bed, trying to remember everything. A year had passed. Quilah. Lily. Cowboy. Hali. Karen. Khelben. Avaril.

But my clock told me it had been only twelve hours. Dawn had a long time before coming over the horizon.

I was 50,000 years in the past. The past to the only future that mattered to me. Quilah hadn't been born. The Murines didn't exist. The Alpha Knights. What a dream that had been.

My body hurt. I was thirsty. I had to use the restroom. My head was killing me. I coughed and coughed some more. I felt sick, as always when I woke up these days.

I must admit. I considered killing myself on the spot. The thought crossed my mind. I just couldn't go on. Not on this world. Not in this reality. Back to a complicated, tormented existence. Back to ill health and crushing loneliness. Back to work.

It was dark outside. Hours before dawn.

I threw clothes on, and not caring about anything else, left without breakfast. Without brushing my teeth. Without combing my hair. Without much of anything. I just didn't care. Nothing mattered.

That damn dream! Damn it, damn it, damn it!

On the train, I asked God. Vashtarr. Whoever.

What was the point of showing me Heaven only to take it away again and leave me in Hell?

But I got no answer.

Near work, I stopped by the bus stop. She wasn't there. I waited for three buses and only grew more disappointed. I finally gave up.

It was cold and raining. No one could see I was crying.

I made it to work early, before anyone else was in.

The lab was filled with the smells of chemicals and suffering. The mice were all awake at this hour, busy driving themselves insane in tiny, nine-inch cages with nothing to do and no toys. Some chewed themselves to death, literally. Some beat their heads against the walls. Some just sat there listlessly, their minds atrophied to nothing. All of those beautiful spirits waiting to be used in some horrific, painful, needless experiment. And then cast aside as garbage.

In that moment, it was just the saddest thing I had ever seen.

I opened one of the cages, a series ironically labelled "QL 7." The cage number was 7001. The mother peered out at me. She huddled over her twelve babies and trembled.

"Oh, God, no," I told her. I softly stroked her warm back. It was so strange to see them so small. So fragile. "I won't hurt you, precious girl." I kept gently petting her as she relaxed. "I won't... I can't... I won't let..."

Then she stepped right into my hand. Again. She had done it yesterday. A year ago. 50,000 years ago.

I looked at her and she at me.

I gingerly put her back. She crawled over her children, and looked back at me.

The look. Telepathy. *Will you help us?* I understood it perfectly, as I always had.

And that was all it took.

I slid the cage out of the rack of cages. The babies woke up and began crawling around, eyes shut, blind little white pinkies, just growing fur. Helpless and curious. Hoping for a sweet, good life. Doomed to terrible disappointment and unimaginable suffering if I didn't save them.

But this was reality. Not a dream. My job. My living. I would be imprisoned. It would be the end of me. I almost put the cage back.

Then one of them, a little boy, opened his eyes for the first time.

Bright blue eyes.

I nearly dropped the cage.

I turned the lights on. I took the cage to the magnifying glasses. The little boy peered at me with those bright blue eyes. Happy. Trusting. Inquisitive. He looked... He looked just like...

The others followed suit, each one slowly opening their eyes. Bright blue eyes. All of them. The mother was a typical albino with red eyes. But her children... Blue eyes were impossible in mice. Impossible.

My heart lurched. My gut told me what I had to do.

It wasn't a reversible decision.

And it required a ridiculous leap of faith.

But every time I looked back at them, there they were, staring back with their blue eyes. And the mother, pleading.

It only took me a minute.

Alright then.

Everything's okay. Everything would be okay, I told myself.

I took the entire line of QL mice — the whole genetic line. About 144 mice. At least three quarters of them were babies who had yet to open their eyes. I put them all in a larger travel cage with bedding, food, and gathered water bottles. I wrapped that in a blanket. The mice seemed excited, not knowing what was going on, but liking the change.

Then I committed 144 counts of grand theft. I stole the mice. I'd be on camera doing it. Some of these mice cost upwards of twenty thousand dollars. Some fifty thousand. Some of them were top-secret material. This was no small crime. The moment I left the building I was a criminal for sure.

Without hesitation, I left the building.

And there she was, standing there in the alley. Looking much the same minus the freaky colors, and wearing a business suit instead of a toga, but it was her without doubt.

"Avaril," I said.

"Jared," she smiled at me warmly.

She remembered.

We embraced in the cold early morning rain.

She saw the cage. I showed her.

"Oh," she gasped. "Oh, my God."

I grinned. "Ready for a trip?"

She looked up in awe. "The bronze plaque in the Murine Hall of Records."

I nodded, smiling wider.

"It... It was..." She stammered.

"Not a dream," I said.

"I have some very powerful credit cards," she said.

I looked at her grimly. “We can’t undo this,” I said. “I’m going to be hunted down and will go to jail for this. If we’re wrong, we’re in deep shit. If we’re right,” I paused. “We won’t be coming back. You... Your businesses, your accomplishments...”

She put her finger on my lips. She replaced it with her mouth. It was as sweet as I remembered.

“Something more,” she said to me.

I nodded. Alright then.

Several hours later saw us on the road with a brand new Subaru Outback loaded with supplies. She was guiding us with her phone. The mice made squeaky noises in the back. The day had turned into dusk as we approached the park.

Devil’s Tower, Wyoming. In the bronze plaque, 50,000 years from now, it was the altar.

The thought that this was just about as crazy as it got kept hammering my mind as I got ready to climb. I used my Alpha Knight disciplines and silenced it. It worked. I laughed in glee. She looked over at me, knowing all of it. Without any telepathy. Or maybe that’s exactly what it was. But she knew. She got it.

If this was the end of my freedom in a crazy world of shit and pain, it was a worthy end indeed. Noble and right. I was doing the right thing. And for the first time in a long time, fearing not.

And Avaril, of course, had never feared anything at all.

But her look told me that hadn’t been true. She had just acted anyway, through all her feelings. That was the meaning of courage. That was her gift.

We checked each other, checked the rig that carried the mouse cage on my back, and met each other’s gaze.

We stood in silence at the bottom of the mountain in the fading light, watching the stars come out.

She read my expression. I wanted to ask what it had all meant. Why did Quilah have to...

She put her hand on my shoulder, just as she had at the end of our adventure as Alpha Knights, and through it I felt all the affection in the world. All the patience. All the compassion. I felt her heart.

Let it go, it told me.

She was right. None of that had even happened yet. It wouldn’t happen for a long, long time. I let my doubts go, and they whispered goodbye on the wind as they drifted away like ashes. They would stay here. We were going somewhere else.

“Last chance,” I told her.

“Second star to the right,” she said. “And straight on till morning.”

We both smiled like children, and began the long climb as the sun went down.

Sometime just before midnight the police found our car and gathered around it far below.

It was all in from here. Avaril was smiling. She knew the risk. And she was still all in, absolutely without doubt that this was the right choice.

And for the first time in my life, I felt that way also.

We climbed as the helicopters were called in and the storm clouds gathered and fell over the top of the mountain. Police began climbing up after us.

Boy, was I going to feel stupid if Actura’s timing wasn’t exactly right, down to the minute out of 50,000 years. If it had been a dream after all. If I had imagined those blue eyes. If, if, if...

My anticipation grew as we neared the top. The mice smelled it and squeaked their concern. I used my discipline to silence my thoughts again, and climbed.

The helicopters were closing in. Avaril was tireless in her ascent. I was powered by adrenaline. Spotlights hit us.

Thunder boomed in the distance above us. The clouds moved rapidly over our heads. The helicopters were almost on us. They were saying something about surrendering over a loudspeaker.

The mice went silent.

The clouds stopped.

The sky lit up. A brilliant, amber orange light broke through the clouds, cascading down over the mountain.
Over us.

And we were gone.

THE END

