

## CHAPTER 8

### *Murine Mythology*







We walked the small group out into the wilderness several miles to escape the crowd that would certainly come back, at least to investigate. The mice (I know, Murines, but I can't stop thinking of them as mice, and it isn't a derogatory term to me!) followed along, with Quilah saying "Come on, come on!" every thousand feet or so. When we finally found a hidden grove of thick trees that resembled oaks, we sat down. It was near dusk.

Birds played in the air around Quilah.

"We're going to be homeless," Cowboy said. "Your demons have doomed us, Mouse."

"Quilah!" Quilah said. Cowboy jumped up angry, and rattled his tail at the little guy, who cowered immediately. I flicked Cowboy in the head.

He chirped — a funny sound — and fell over. Oops. My TK strength was getting stronger for sure. He sat up in a Vasserian heartbeat and growled.

"Your guardian Takers are all that's keeping you..." he began, then saw that Quilah was genuinely afraid, maybe even sad. Cowboy's demeanor changed. He waddled over to Quilah and licked him. "I'm sorry brother," he said. "You... Something is happening here and it's new for all of us. It's dangerous."

"It's new," Hali said. "And perhaps dangerous. But we need to know more."

They laid down in the grasses and sniffed it, seeming disappointed.

"You all look hungry," I said.

"We don't get much to eat. Bigger faster mice get it from us usually," Quilah said.

"Wasn't going to be for much longer, though," Hali said. "We are... were... growing big and fast ourselves."

"It's alright," Lily finally spoke.

Hali was large for a young mouse. As big as most adults, and built strong. But he wasn't a meathead. Hali was the brains of the outfit.

Khelben closed his eyes and focused his will. The grass around them began vanishing and a pile of cubes began slowly appearing in front of the mice.

"Ard!" Lily exclaimed (her vocabulary vastly expanded there), and dug in. The others waited a few seconds to make sure she wouldn't keel over, and then followed.

I looked at Khelben.

"Matter manipulation," Khelben said. "It's one of our main powers. And the second hardest one to master. Better practice."

"What's the hardest one?" Karen asked.

"The tesseraact," Khelben said immediately.

"How did you know what they like to eat?" I asked. "I thought reading their minds was violating their free will."

"I paid attention at the food dispensary stations," he said. I felt foolish. "And you should get used to doing the same. Every detail counts."

The food pile grew large — as large as Hali — and stopped.

The mice ate heartily.

"It's demon food," Cowboy said with a full mouth.

"Demon food tastes great," Hali said. Lily nodded.

"Demons? Takers?" I asked Quilah.

"Our stories," Quilah said between mouthfuls. He was reducing the pile with inspiration. "Forever ago, we came from another place. A spirit world, where demons tortured us and killed us at will. We were worthless. Living in terror and pain all our lives."

"The demons were called Takers?" I said.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Very bad. Very, very bad."

"They looked just like us?"

“Well, not exactly...”

“So we might not be Takers,” Avaril said.

“Mayyybe not...” he seemed skeptical. “Sure look like them though.”

“Can you show us?” I asked.

Quilah relayed the request so the mice finished scarfing their meal and led us back into the city, skulking about like the street urchins they were. However, we had to run to keep up. Had to really run. Our bodies handled it flawlessly, but those mice easily covered one hundred miles that night.

They took us to the hall of records, or what passed for it. It was closed, but Khelben phased us all through the wall and disabled the alarms in half a thought. Inside, it was huge, with screens and single-purpose computers everywhere. There were no chairs or tables. Mice did everything on their bellies, or sitting. If they had to stand up, it was most often to fight or negotiate. And there were no books.

They had no writing that we could tell.

But on the far wall was a huge plaque, one hundred feet across, made of a copper colored metal with a bas relief of a story being told. It was old, and this one was a reproduction of the original, we were informed.

In the plaque, caveman/mouse relief drawings depicted human-shaped creatures burning mice. Stabbing mice. Pulling their guts out, feeding them to monsters that looked vaguely familiar to predators from hell. They showed mice in cages — that much was clear. The plaque was chock full of dying, suffering, torture, pain. It was hard to look at. But at the end was something different.

“What’s this? I said, pointing. The entire story of the plaque came to a compositional point at the end, leading the viewers eye to a large, open space at the top which depicted two human-like figures, stretching upward, holding a giant mouse up above their heads while standing on some sort of tower, or cylinder with a widening base. From the clouds above, lights were shining down on them and the raised-up mouse. Down around the base of the cylinder, behind bars, were mice packed so tight into their hell they could barely move. The light barely reached there.

“That looks like...” Avaril began.

“In the very end, something lucky happened,” Quilah said, eager. “The story says that one day, the first of Us was born. The real Us as we are now...”

“As most of Us are now,” Hali said.

Quilah cowered again, ashamed.

“I’m sorry,” Hali said. He licked the little guy. “I didn’t intend to be cruel. I am still used to having to remind us all that were are Shunned so we don’t step out of line and get killed. Now things are different. I’m sorry. Old habits die hard. There’s nothing wrong with you. I’m sorry, Quilah.”

Quilah perked up at the use of his name. Apparently the little guy was a sensitive type.

Hali tried to cover it up by interjecting, “What he means by the real Us is that true Murines were born by accident, suddenly, in that horrible place. Like we are, with awareness, sentience, higher thought, and blue eyes. The albino gene, with transparent eyes that appear red because of the blood behind them, is considered now to be a reminder of those hard times in that place of torment. The story, which is pure fictional mythology, says that one day those with the new intelligence and the unique eye coloring just evolved. Just showed up. No reason given. It’s quite vague about a great many things. Whatever really happened, it almost certainly wasn’t...”

Quilah was shifting about, very excited, and in a bold move I guessed he had never attempted before, interrupted his large friend.

“Anyway, one day WE came into that world,” he pointed along with the plaque. “And on that same day, two Takers changed, and rebelled!” He paused for effect. When no effect came upon our confused faces, he said, “The Takers spirited a few of Us — the real Us-es — away, out of the place of pain and death, to a high place of power that touched the sky. From that sacred place, they could reach just out of... The bad place...”

"Hell," I said. "We call it Hell."

"Yeah okay, Hell... they could just see out of Hell there. And then The Beholden came down from the stars... from..."

"Heaven," I said. Khelben frowned. Avaril pursed her lips. Karen got a *how dare you* face going. Pfff. Whatever. "The good place."

"Yeah, sure. Heaven. The Beholden came down from Heaven, with golden lights, and they grabbed the Takers who took Us... And Us too... caught them up into the sky — the stars — and up through the planes of existence, and brought Us to paradise. To here." He smiled, hand out at the plaque. Our enthusiastic tour guide at the museum.

"The Beholden?" I said. "Gods?"

Quilah was relaying the conversation to the others as fast as he could, given that he was still the only one who could hear or see us.

"What are gods?" Hali asked.

"Beings of great power — much greater than most living entities," Karen said. "People worship them... Well, our people. And the gods take care of the people in return. Usually."

I was thinking of Earth history and human sacrifice. The Crusades. Cthulhu...

"Yes, the story of the Beholden was that they were like your gods," Hali said. "Very powerful. Able to travel through stars long, long before we could."

"You have no gods here?" Avaril said.

"No," Hali replied. "We Murines don't see things like that. If you cannot care for yourself, no one will. The myth is the only mention of such beings."

"What happened to the others?" I asked. "The ones left behind in Hell?"

Quilah got a look of horror. "All dead now."

"The story says they were left behind. But they were animals. Not Us," Hali said.

"And the two Takers? Did they face judgement?" I said. Nice story. Neato and mythical. Might as well hear all of it.

"They were forgiven by Us," Quilah said. "We are a very forgiving race. And, by the power of the Beholden, the Takers were transformed into the New Beholden."

"What happened to the New Beholden?" Karen asked.

"Why aren't there any statues of them... or books?" I asked.

"Books? What are books?" Quilah asked.

"No statues because their countenance is fearsome to us still," Hali said. "They were, after all, supposedly Takers who rebelled against their Kingdom. These carvings are frightening to our culture still. They are the only pictures we have of our history. It's silly, but as small pups we are taught that anything that looks like a Taker is extremely dangerous. It is, in fact, the very first thing we learn."

Well, right on there. Anything that even slightly resembles a human should probably be blown up on sight. If you want your culture to make it.

"No one really believes in them anymore," Cowboy said. "We didn't come here from another dimension. Scientists have proven that we evolved."

"Like the Atrax?" Hali said.

The vibe in the room went into fear. We could smell it as sharply as they could.

"Not like them!" Quilah said. "Not them!"

"It took Us a lot longer than that!" Cowboy said, irritated at being afraid.

I shook my head. I was very tempted to just link into their minds. It would make it so much easier! I might have already gotten used to it.

"Slow down," I said.

"Good luck with that," Khelben said.

"What happened to these Takers who saved your ancestors?" I asked.

"Yes, what happened to the New Beholden?" Avaril asked.

"They lived among us for awhile — the first Us-es — and then went away," Quilah said.

"Died?"

"No one knows. Just never came back. They went back to Heaven maybe. History never mentions them again."

"What happened after that?"

"We grew, and made more of Us, and more, and then finally made cool stuff."

Karen and I laughed.

"And then?"

"By then the whole planet was full of Murines," Quilah said.

"But all those who looked like the first ones," Hali said, "With white hair and red eyes, were put to death at birth. Over and over until Murines learned to kill anything that reminded them of the place they came from. For fear of being taken back. Supposedly."

"All the mice there were albinos?" I said.

They nodded.

"But the first of the true Us had sapphire blue eyes, not red," Quilah said. "And long after that, many colors, but never red. And never all-white coats."

"Hence the title 'Shunned,'" I said. "If they don't manage to kill you first."

Cowboy looked down at the ground. "Even partially white coats are cast into the street to die when they're just minutes old. Pink and blind."

"How did you..." I began.

"There are plenty of mothers and adults who don't want to see anyone die," Hali said. "They risk being Shunned or killed themselves to rear some of us. Never a full white and red, though. That almost never happens anymore. I don't think one has been born in many generations."

"This mou— Quilah here," Cowboy said, "Was taken in by my mother, who loved me greatly, when I told her that he looked like me. I was young and knew only simple things. She took him in, loved him, weaned him, and was driven out into the wilderness for it two weeks later, a maddened mob biting her to pieces. I never saw her again. She was a kind, gentle, and good Murine. She was mother to all of us, and it cost her everything."

"We had to hide," Lily said, shaking her head slowly. "Hide hide."

Oh, I got it. She was simple. Umm... mentally challenged. Retarded, okay? No wonder she was so cheerful.

"We raised him on our own," Hali said. "On illegal mother's milk and whatever we could find that we had to do... things for."

"Like stealing," Cowboy said, sounding proud.

"And other things," Lily said. But then she shut up, looking ashamed and shuffling her feet, realizing she had said something bad.

"We had to defend ourselves," Hali said. "Anyway, he was Cowboy's brother. Our brother. We couldn't let him die. We refused. He became one of us."

"There were ten of us once," Cowboy said. "Now there's four."

We paused. The emotion we felt from them was stinging recent pain. These mice had had it hard. I happened to glance sideways at Avaril and saw her face was set in hardness, but her eyes were watery. In a brief glimpse into her soul, I saw that she had a similar childhood. She knew I saw it, and glared at me so sharply that I snapped my head back like a rubber band. I thought *sorry* at her, but she went back to listening to the mice.

But the mice were just looking around, unsure of their futures.

“Why no books?” I asked.

“Writing?” Hali asked.

“Yes.”

“Short arms, small hands probably,” he said. “We have plenty of writing and language, mostly symbols, but before computers were developed, only the Learners wrote anything, and it was rare. We conveyed important things through smell, and more through stories and speech. We have excellent memories.”

Now I understood what they meant by smell. Our Vasserian noses were probably the only ones in the universe better than theirs. Our minds didn’t know how to interpret everything they told us, but I could smell their emotions and intentions without using telepathy or empathy. I could smell every single detail of every scent in the room — millions of them. And out in the forest, I had smelled the age of the trees. Their noses were like the eyes of eagles. These Murines communicated largely through smell. The other means of communication had come later. Writing was an unneeded luxury, developed only recently.

“But you were writing on the wall,” I said.

Hali smiled. “I was born to a Learner, in the caste of scholars,” he said. “My life would have been a fine one, but my parents suffered an accident, and were slain. I suddenly found myself an orphan, along with nine siblings. I had received some education, in my early age, before my parents died. But it was not enough. No one would adopt me. My parents were in the ninth tier of research, and that intimidated most Murine would-be parents. They felt they could not give me the life I deserved.”

“So they left you to die?” I asked.

“Better than a life of disappointment,” he said. “It is our way.” He moved his stance into one just slightly less confident than he was used to. “Nobody wanted to get attached. You’ve seen why.”

“You guys seem to let your own die rather easily,” I said. “How did you make it this long?”

He shrugged. “Survival of the fittest,” he said. “The weak aren’t allowed to go on. It’s a very important part of our society.”

I was about to say *a stupid part*, but Avaril poked me with TK.

“Quilah would never have made it,” I said. “What were you gonna do with him? Dye his hair? Get him contact lenses?”

Puzzled but nonplussed, Hali replied, “He had no chance. None of us really did. It was just a matter of time.” He looked slightly miffed. “But what else could we do? We wanted to live. We did our best, day by day. Sometimes minute by minute. We all knew what was inevitable. For all of us, but especially him — and we would die protecting him.”

“It would have been weeks,” Cowboy said. “We had some shoddy plans, but they wouldn’t have worked for all of us, and we wanted to stay together. We made a pact.”

“To fate we stride together,” Lily said cheerfully.

“Tail up the entire way,” Cowboy finished. “Proud to the end. Die fighting, not hiding.”

“But we sure did a lot of hiding,” Lily said. Then she did that *oops* face and looked at the ground again, shuffling her feet.

“Yeah, we did,” Quilah said. “But we survived.” He tightened his lips. “It’s nothing to be nose in the dirt about.”

“No, it’s not,” Avaril said. “You all did very well. We aren’t going to let anyone get you.”

Quilah relayed this to the others, and Lily grinned. Hali nodded, but seemed troubled. Cowboy just frowned. Quilah said, “Come on, guys! We have guardian Takers! Maybe they’re Beholden! We are *so* set!”

Cowboy looked at Hali and gestured to his tall friend. *You take this one.*

“We *might* be set,” Hali said. “We don’t even know if they are Takers or not, or if they are even telling the



truth.”

“We are,” I said.

“We do not trust lightly,” Hali said. “Not just because we are Shunned. Our race doesn’t trust easily in general.”

“What must we do to earn your trust?” I asked. But none of them answered. I sensed they didn’t know what to say.

*“Why do we need to earn their trust?”* Khelben asked telepathically.

*“These mice are special, I can feel it,”* I sent in return.

*“What proof have you?”* he sent.

*“None,”* I faced him. *“My gut. That’s it. I just know it. Like I know things for sure. I can’t explain it, I just know it. I know!”*

He turned away. I was surprised.

*“Okay,”* he sent.

I paused, expecting a long argument. But no. I looked at the others.

*“These mice are important. He can see us. He’s different. We need some mice to guide us around anyway.”*

“We aren’t arguing with you,” Karen said. “I agree. They’re special.”

“Even if not, we’re not letting anything bad happen to them,” Avaril said as fact.

Quilah was now listening.

“I caution you against becoming attached to your subjects,” Khelben said. “No good results of it. We must be higher than that.”

I looked at Avaril staring at the mice.

“Too late,” I said.

Avaril looked back at us, intensity on her calm face.

“Nothing bad happens to them,” she said.

Khelben sighed and resumed his previous face. Solid rock. We were tasking him. I could tell.

“What are Atrax?” I asked. Oh yeah. I had caught that.

The mice jumped when Quilah said the name again. Hmmm. Mousey boogeyman?

Hali steeled himself to answer us.

“We are at war with them,” he said. “Long ago we were one people. But they disagreed with our laws, and left once they had the means. They left our planet and never came back.”

“Until recently,” Cowboy said, and shuddered against his will.

“They’ve changed,” Quilah said. “Horribly, horribly changed. So Murines say.”

“You’ve never seen one?” Karen asked.

“Oh, Skitters no!” Quilah said.

“No,” Hali said. “Almost no one has seen them. Only rumors or space battles and rare engagements. They are supposedly truly terrible now. In just a few thousand years.”

“How many thousand?” Khelben asked, suddenly interested.

“About eight,” Hali said.

Khelben frowned.

“What?” I said.

“Not enough time for evolution to change a race so dramatically,” he said. “Something must have intervened.” He got that look on his face.

“Zorians?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “There wouldn’t be a planet left if Zorians had been involved. But there are plenty of other races who serve the Zoriath, or who wish to be like them, and have a hand in the upbringing of species. It is common,



unfortunately. Knights abhor it.”

“What do we *do* about it?” Avaril asked.

“We stop it before it begins when we can,” Khelben said. “But when we can’t, we leave it alone. Only the Zoriath themselves are the true enemy. Everything else is free will.”

“Was that the planet we passed on the way in?” I asked.

“Most likely,” Khelben said. “It had plenty of life on it. And life so close to another occupied planet is rare indeed.” He pursed his lips and put his hand to his chin. “Still, we need to know.”

“You guys came from *space*?!” Quilah blurted.

I nodded.

“Amaaaazing!” he said.

“I’m going to reconnoiter that planet,” Khelben said. And before any of us could argue, he had tessered away.

“Where’d he go!” Quilah gasped.

“To meet your Atrax,” I said.

Quilah got big eyes. “He won’t come back! They’re fierce and terrible!”

“Oh, he better,” I said. “He’s our ride home.” I smiled at him. “Besides, he’s very powerful. If we’re lucky, he’ll just wipe them all out for you.”

“He won’t do that, psycho guy,” Avaril said playfully.

“Maybe they’ll attack him and incur his wrath,” I said.

“Scoff,” Karen said aloud.

“Yeah,” I said. “That would be too easy.”

“Let’s get these Murines to a safe place and come up with a plan,” Avaril said. She closed her eyes and vanished one second later, to appear ten feet to our right, in the direction of the door.

“Wow — our first tesseract,” Karen said. “Nice, Avaril! Nice!”

Avaril smiled proudly, then blushed. “I guess we’re walking. I was shooting for the grove.”

“Aiming high is best,” I said, and started for the door. “Come on, Quilah.”

“Come on, guys, come on!” Quilah said, and scurried on behind us.

“Where are we going?” Hali asked.

“To a fantastic, amazing destiny!” Quilah yelled. “Yayyyy!”

Hali looked skeptical. Cowboy was still peering about him, trying to see us, sure we were demons taking them back to Hell.

“Yayyyy, great destiny!” Lily cried, and galloped after Quilah.

If only that could be bottled.

