

## CHAPTER 9

### *The Mouse Sentinels*

We set about immediately fixing their issues, intervening like the gods we felt like now. The gods they never had, but deserved. Oh yeah, we were sure we were that good.

We took them back to the “oak” grove, some twelve miles from the city. The birds welcomed Quilah back, and the squirrels immediately surrounded him, which could not be ignored. There were some bee-like insects flitting about that swarmed over his head for a minute, then went back to their nearby hive. He giggled, unafraid of them. Even the wind seemed to shift in his favor, gently rustling his soft fur.

They had no home now, thanks to us. So we had to fix that first.

We practiced our matter manipulation. It was hard as hell. Making one brick out of clay — a substance already very close to brick — took me half an hour, and by the end of it I was sweating glowing luminescent liquid. It took so much brain power my body felt taxed. I felt hungry. Always willing to test my limits, I ate the brick.

“Hey, that was for their house!” Karen said.

“Which will be done in a thousand years if we don’t get a LOT better at matter manipulating,” I said with my mouth full. “We should just do it the old way.”

So I showed them how to build lean-tos and and the middle of it, the mice went to town. They dug, pushed huge boulders around with their noses, chewed trees down, and had built a massive half-dome hut in minutes. We all stood there staring in shock.

Quilah saw our faces.

“Murines are very fast,” he said. “Gotta be fast.”

“Apparently,” I said. “I taught survival classes out on my dad’s reservation in younger years, and I thought I was kinda cool.”

“These Murines haven’t lost their instincts,” Avaril said. “They’re way ahead of us.”

Hali observed his work and made some adjustments. “Weatherproof,” he said.

Cowboy packed mud into the holes, looking sideways at Hali for some reason. Lily was stronger than she looked. She did most of the heavy lifting — equal or more than Hali. She smiled at her handiwork. Quilah dug out the inside in minutes, including an escape tunnel. He probably moved close to a ton or more of dirt.

“Well, okay then,” I said. I finished the brick.

Over the next couple of days we listened, learned, and used our pathetic superpowers to make life easier on the mice, even though they didn’t need it. Making fire was easy for me. I showed Avaril how to do it. She showed Karen and I how to move earth around, including living plants. We shaped the grove, the clay, dirt, and rocks, into a massive fortress around the mouse hut. They thought it was overkill. We were being cautious. We designed it to withstand an assault from a bunch of angry mice. It might have lasted thirty seconds, but that would give us time to fly away.

Our abilities were certainly getting stronger quickly. My TK was now up to about 300 pounds and climbing. I

could matter manipulate a brick in about five minutes and not feel like I had run up a ten mile hill carrying a car.

Avaril could tesser herself about fifty feet. She could tesser objects equal to her mass about the same. No one volunteered to be a guinea... um, test subject after she tessered a rock into a tree by accident and both detonated. She thought it was great. I was glad I wasn't standing so close. Lily had been trotting up behind us when it happened. She stopped with a puzzled look on her face, then decided against whatever she had wanted, and turned around without a word and trotted back down the hill.

Karen spent her time in quiet contemplation, meditating by a gigantic, gnarled tree she called "Old Grandma," since it had given birth to most of the trees within sight, including our grove. She said she spoke to the tree in her trances, and it told her the history of the land. She came down one afternoon and told us to get inside. A half hour later the sky opened up and poured rain down on us as if God was emptying his entire bucket at once. The plains flooded. Our valley was underwater in minutes. The mice seemed used to it. They ran for higher ground, among lightning and thunder in colors and volumes I had never believed possible back on Earth. The lightning wasn't quick here. It rose from the ground and dropped from the sky both, crawling across the air like growing, titanic snakes, biding their time before deciding where to make their contact. It was beautiful and frightening. I didn't know if a Vasserian body could take a lightning hit, and wasn't eager to experiment with that one. We all ran for higher ground and I held a TK shield over our heads while Avaril made fire to keep us warm. Though it was in the thirties, and the mice were clearly freezing, we Vasserians felt just fine. The water turned to hail and ice. We still felt fine. The hailstones became orbs of thin, flash-frozen ice, holding snow powder inside when they crashed into the ground. It made lots of shattering, harsh noises. The mice folded their ears back until Karen learned how to manipulate sound waves and quiet everything down. It took all her effort, but she maintained it until the ice became falling icicles and the lightning danced from giant plummeting needle to needle on the way down. My TK shield held. It held through the hundred-mile-an-hour winds, and Avaril's fire kept us warm and dry when the temperature plunged below zero and everything froze solid. Just before that happened, every tree, plant and living piece of vegetation on the hill suddenly turned a weird shade of tan. We watched the color creep over everything in sight like an invisible artist pouring paint all over the landscape. We even saw some animals rushing for cover, covered in tan.

I made a puzzled face at Quilah. He yelled over the sound reduction and wind.

"The Foundation," he said. "Living fungus that protects everything from the flash freezes. So it can slowly eat it later, over years."

I gazed out at the alien life form protecting its food. Creepy. Fast mold. Not cool. Or maybe very cool. I kept it off us, but it covered the TK shield.

Hours went by. My impeccable brain counted twelve hours, plus twenty-one minutes before the tan mold left the shield. It was morning. The storm clouds looked like an entire world above us. The whole world was azure blue. Lightning still crawled in the distant horizon. It looked like we were underwater in some exotic, fantasy bowl of awe. The wind was making a howling noise, like wolves, across the plains. In the distance, the city was untouched. The sky above the city was a perfect halo of clear turquoise and emerald sky. No wonder they had developed weather control. Or learned to build quick shelter. Paradise had an edge to it.

We stacked firewood, found edible plants for Karen to encourage to grow in our new garden, and expanded the castle — and the grove to hide it.

We spoke of plans. Nothing seemed to threaten these mice except the war.

The war. Khelben. They had gotten him!

My alarm was immediately known by the other Vasserians, and smelled by the mice. We got together on the roof of the castle and all of us sent into the right angle of sky (thank God the planet wasn't in the way at that time of day) a desperate message. It had been days since Khelben had gone to the other planet. At a mere twenty light years, he should have been back within the hour.

"*Khelben!*" we all sent together, hoping the boost would reach him if he was in the asteroid field.

No answer came.

"Holy crap," I said. "One down so soon? And the only one who knows how to use his power. Uncool."

"He might not be dead," Avaril said. "That's just a bad story." She smiled at me. "You have an overactive imagination."

I realized she was right. My mind tended to jump to worst case scenarios. In order to avoid or beat them, but it still did it even when I couldn't know the truth, nor do anything about it. Annoying.

"He's alive," Karen said. "He is well."

Avaril looked at her, eyebrows up. "Wow."

"No shit," I echoed. "To the asteroid belt even?"

"No, he's still on the other planet," Karen said. Her eyes looked glazed over. She was looking into space. "It's right there. Atrax. It's... Disturbed."

The way she said *disturbed* made my flesh crawl.

Then she snapped out of it. She looked tired.

"He'll be back in another eighteen hours," she said.

And indeed, to the minute, she was right.

Quilah was out in the post-storm vanilla sunlight, surrounded by playing squirrel-looking things. He was watching them, his face relaxed, as if there were not a care in the world. Lily came over to him, happily bouncing, and the squirrel things ran away. They happily munched some food, sharing a moment and laughing together. What their world must be like. I was almost envious.

I felt Khelben enter telepathy range.

Khelben parked the crystal ship in the asteroids again, flew within range, and tessered down to us.

We all looked at him like *what gives? You scared the crap out of us.*

"Apologies," he sent. "*I have been to the planet they call Atrax. I had to do extensive research.*"

We all waited for why. He knew we were waiting. Bastard.

"We're alone," I said. "The mice are a mile away scavenging."

"*Well within hearing range,*" he sent. "*The planet is disturbed.*" We all looked at Karen. Through our link, Khelben understood why. He nodded. "*There has been some kind of influence, but I could not find one trace of Zorians. I considered options, and returned.*"

"Some **kind** of influence?" I sent. "*That's ominous.*"

"*They no longer resemble the mice we know,*" Khelben sent. "*They have been changed. It certainly looks like Zorian influence, but I can find no proof.*"

"So, they're all gone now, right?" I sent.

"*Without proof, I shall not intervene,*" Khelben sent. "*It is against our way to influence a new society, whatever we may think of them or their morals.*"

"You didn't destroy them?" I said out loud.

Avaril poked me. "*The mice will be frightened if they hear of their enemies,*" she sent. "*Their stories are already scaring the crap out of them. Have compassion.*"

"*They have to face them sooner or later,*" I said.

"*True enough,*" Khelben said. "*Because they are coming. I witnessed a shipyard, building ships at an alarming rate. They have superior technology by far — a product of the intervention of an alien race most likely. The Murines don't stand a chance in this war.*"

I looked down at the ground and moved just my eyes up at everyone. "*Even with us on their side?*"

"*We don't take sides in free-willed affairs,*" Khelben firmly stated.

"*We're going to let this race be wiped out?*" I shot back. "*Our mission is to not let that happen.*"

*“Perhaps,”* Khelben sent. *“But nevertheless, no true enemy could I find. This is a matter for them to work out as nature decrees.”*

*“There is nothing natural about 200-pound mice,”* I sent. *“I say we defend them like we were sent here to do.”*

*“Maybe we should let it be, as sad as that sounds,”* Karen said. *“I don’t want to see them die either, and I’m not even sure I could stand by and watch it happen, but I have an odd feeling that Khelben was right with his earlier warning. If we intervene, we’re going to change everything. We could do so much damage. To two worlds.”*

Avaril finally spoke. *“No. We defend them.”*

Karen sighed and nodded. She had to try.

Khelben looked amongst us and said, *“Is this your decision?”*

We looked into each others eyes, knew, and sent back to him, *“Yes, it is.”*

*“How human of you,”* he sent. *“I leave you to it, then. But I am not responsible for this breach in protocol.”* Then he turned and leapt into the sky.

That only left *how* to intervene. And that one was huge.

We decided to let the mice in on it somewhat. After all, it was their planet and we had pledged to protect them personally. And we had absolutely no idea what we were doing.

*“Did he see them?!”* Quilah said. *“What do they look like?!”*

*“Well he, ah, didn’t tell us,”* I started.

*“Destroy them all!”* Cowboy shouted. *“Blow up their planet!”*

*“I’m not sure we can even...”* Karen started.

*“Can you equal out our technology gap?”* Hali said. *“Just make it fair.”*

*“That sounds reasona—”* Avaril started.

*“Can’t you just help everyone make peace?”* Lily said.

And that shut us all up.

I mean, really. Here we were, defenders of the universe, and we were talking about killing things already. War, kill, take, smite. Yay, team human.

Lily went back to smiling. Hmm. I wondered.

Quilah lit up. *“That’s a great idea!”* he said. *“We can all be happy.”* Kids. Naive and innocent. *“Let’s do that one. That one is good.”* Lily nodded. Quilah chewed affectionately on her fur behind her ears. She loved it and her eyes closed in bliss. I was going to have to remember that trick back home. I wondered if it would work on—

Avaril shook her head no. Alrighty then.

We got the mouse input and then took our discussion up into the high range stratosphere. The mice ran back into the city to get supplies from their secret stashes all over (I learned that all mice have secret stashes) and bring them back to our hideout. It was a short distance for them. Floating there in the sub-zero, deep green sky on the edge of night, we came up with a plan, subject to change. First we would make certain these mice were safe. Then we would travel to the planet Atrax (or whatever it was called), and suggest a peace treaty. If they didn’t go for it, we would then request their surrender. When they didn’t go for that, because they wouldn’t, and we didn’t have anywhere near the power to pull off the single-handed subjugation of an entire star-faring race, we would go back to Muscila and quickly come up with a new plan to balance the scales somehow. But it had two holes. One, sharing advanced technology with the mice required Khelben. He knew every level of technology in most universes. We knew about the Internet and iPhones, which on the scale we were dealing with was rocks and pokey sticks. He might not go for it. Two, and worse, we agreed that, given their myth about Takers, we couldn’t appear to these mice. We had to do everything we did without direct contact.

In other words, through our new friends, assuming they were willing.

The plan was thin. Real thin. And stupidly human. But it was the best we had so far, mostly because none of us was remotely deciding to be enlightened about it. I was ready to defend the race I was already (way) attached

to. Avaril had a holy quest about our particular group, and a strong sense of right and wrong. Human versions anyway, and God help the Vasserian who tried to change her mind. Karen was the most cautious among us, probably the wisest, but she agreed that to sit back and watch the race we were sent to protect get slaughtered *probably* constituted a “fail” grade in the grand scheme of things. She felt strongly against violence, and felt sure that if the Atraxians were thinking beings, she could convince them to go for peace.

There were too many variables. I suddenly felt sorry for the president of the United States. No matter what I thought of him, he had to make decisions like this every day. Of course, he had a cabinet and a huge staff, and Congress, and all that. We had a Khelben.

“Absolutely not,” he said when we summoned him.

“Aww, come *on*,” I said. That had never worked with my mother either.

“Not going to happen,” he said. “You at least have the excuse of temporary insanity due to possession by human souls. I would be put on trial back home for needless intervention.”

“We were sent to *do* something,” I said. “Let’s *do* something!”

“Y’all said the decision was ours,” Avaril said. “Is it, or isn’t it?”

Khelben looked to one side and grimaced. “It is. But—”

“This is our decision,” I said. “Like it or hate it, you gotta man-up and...”

“I shall not,” he raised his voice. Good Lord, was Khelben getting upset?

Then we were interrupted by running mice.

The four of them ran up the hill. We felt them coming from, literally, a mile away.

We waited for them.

What business do you have disturbing the gods on Olympus, mortals? I thought, amused and joking as I usually did to cover anxiety. But Quilah’s face sobered me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when they came close.

“They’ve raised the institute of Required Service,” Cowboy said, out of breath from running.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Can you hide us for a long time?” Quilah asked, desperate.

“We’re *going!*” Cowboy commanded.

Lily shifted nervously on her feet.

“What the heck is going on?” I said.

“The government has enacted an old law for the first time,” Hali said. “One they have never had to enact before. In times of dire need, all citizens shall be required to serve the greater whole of the community by giving one quarter at minimum, with adequate compensation, and status given.”

I looked puzzled. Legalese wasn’t my thing.

“They’ve been drafted,” Avaril said.

Cowboy hopped thirty feet and slapped his hands together.

“We’re gonna be *warriors!*” he yelled. “Finally!”

“You don’t have to go,” Karen said. Cowboy rattle his tail furiously.

“We do!” he said. “Deserters won’t be able to hide *anywhere!*” He stomped. “I won’t be a deserter! No way! Death first!”

“We disagree on this point,” Hali explained. “Cowboy and I will serve willingly. But Lily is not eligible, and Quilah abhors violence.”

“But you all made a pact,” I said.

“To fate we stride,” Avaril said.

Cowboy viciously nodded his head.

“Yes,” Hali said. “We can’t separate. But they won’t accept Lily, and Quilah will be killed on sight.”



“We have this other plan that might change things,” I said.

“It matters little unless you are going to violate our free will,” Hali said. Damn smart mouse! Where did he figure that one out? “This is what we want. What we’ve prayed for. Once we are enlisted, they will have to accept us into society. They have to. Status and the promise of more if we can earn it are the payments for service.”

“Not if you die,” Karen said.

“IF we die,” Cowboy said, “It will be as Murines, not as cowards!”

“We go or not, together,” Hali said. “And we are an inherently social people, honored ones.” He looked toward us hard. Serious. “We need a society to belong to to be happy. They will have to accept us. This war can change things for the better.”

I was quiet. Our godlike plans were being destroyed by four mice. *Oh well. The best laid...*

Poke. Ow. I smirked at Avaril. She was smirking back. Oh, my god. Was she... flirting with me? How quickly my mind went off topic.

“We took a vote,” Hali said. He paused, but only from concern for Quilah, I felt. “We are joining.”

I knew how that vote went. Cowboy got five votes, Hali got one big one, Lily waited until it was done, and when Quilah caved in, she went with his vote. Yeah. Just like back home.

“Guess we’re parting ways, Takers!” Cowboy said. “Thanks for all the nothing, and go home.”

“Aww, come on, Cowboy,” I said. “We’re not your enemy. You can trust us.”

He leaned in at thin air, peering hard at nothing.

“Trust is *earned*, Taker!”

Well, he might have a point there.

“We’re not Takers,” I said.

“Prove it!” he chirped. “Meanwhile, we’re signing up!”

“We can’t talk you out of it?” Karen said. Avaril and I looked at her.

“*Have you seen this psycho mouse’s face?*” I sent.

“Alright,” Karen said. “Then we’re enlisting with you.”

“Yeah!” I said. “What do you think about... What?!”

Avaril smiled. “AWESome plan, Karen!” Karen smiled.

“Ummm... No revealum to the mices...?” I said.

“Murines!” Cowboy growled.

“Don’t make me smite you, pleeb,” I said.

Cowboy was furiously figuring out how to take me on (for sure) when Khelben interjected.

“You promised to defend these mice,” he said. “Keep your word, Knights.”

“Without exposing ourselves,” Avaril said.

“Damn,” I said. “Are you sure? I’d like to see you...”

I actually blocked the TK poke, but it was followed one hundredth of a second later by a TK slap to the face. We engaged in a few seconds of TK sparring, and ended up giggling like children. That was weird.

“We’re behind you,” Avaril said. “You won’t get hurt in this war. Feel free to join.”

Quilah seemed to visibly relax just a little. Hali smiled and nodded. Lily never stopped smiling. But Cowboy was not pleased.

“Don’t help me any,” he said. “I don’t trust you, and I don’t need help. I want to earn my honor. No cheating!”

“It’s not cheating not to die,” Karen said.

“Do you trust your friend?” I asked him through Quilah. Cowboy knew that was who I meant.

He fumed. “Yes.”

“Then trust these people,” Quilah said. “They aren’t Takers. I can feel it. They don’t mean us any harm.”

“They may not mean it,” Cowboy said. “But they sure can deliver it. By accident if they aren’t careful. And

they're not."

"You're one to talk," I said.

"Bravery and risk taking is exalted among Murines," he said. "Stupidity and control are aspects of Takers! Take risks, accomplish great things — enjoy what we have right now — and earn it on our own!"

"You're going to get our help no matter what," I said.

"I refuse it," Cowboy said. "Of my own free will!"

"This is war," Karen said. "Murines are going to die. Maybe a lot of them."

"Then so be it. I die," he said with enthusiasm. "Nothing lasts forever."

We didn't know how to tell him. We didn't have the heart to tell them. They were just no match for the Atraxians.

Unless we could change the odds, it was going to be genocide.

"You can start by getting all of us in," Hali said. "That's going to take a very real miracle."

I sighed. "You're *sure* this is what you want."

He looked at his companions. Everyone agreed, although Quilah most reluctantly. At last he nodded to us firmly.

I looked at my own team. They agreed also, Karen reluctantly.

"So be it," I said. I lowered my head. This was really going to happen.

So what. It was just a dream.

"To war!" Cowboy shouted, and ran for the city.

Oh, I pray this is just a dream.

