Mouse

by andlat

"Mom! Don't walk so fast!" He had to practically jog to catch up.

The Costume Box
2023

Chapter 1

Mouse

"Mom! Don't walk so fast!" He had to practically jog to catch up.

"We need to hurry, Alexander."

"Alex."

"There's a lot of things to prepare before showtime and that isn't even including getting you into your costume." The backstage area was still mostly empty and felt almost cavernous. That was a real stage he could see just through the curtains. "Nervous?" He shrugged even as he felt a few fluttering butterflies. "You'll do fine. I told you before what you'll be doing."

"Running around, knocking things over."

"Yep." She gave him a hug. "I really do appreciate this. I owe you one." He shrugged again. One of the cast members had gotten chicken pox. It happened.

"Now quick go change and then I'll do your makeup."

"Makeup?"

"Stage makeup? Y'know, what you wear on stage?" She handed him a tidy bundle of clothes.

"What are these?"

"You have so many questions. They're tights. You put on the

tights, the leotard, and then the slippers."

"This is a boy costume?" His mom looked at him impatiently, as if she could not believe he was objecting now. "What did I get myself into?"

"You're getting yourself into the changing room on the left." She pushed him in the direction of the changing room. "You volunteered, remember?"

"Yeah, you basically made me volunteer." He muttered. Well, he had come this far, hadn't he? He stripped and dressed. Superheroes wore tights, right? No superhero he could think of would wear something like this. "I guess the girls wear leotards and tights." He muttered, but that did nothing to make him feel better. He reminded himself it was just a few minutes on stage and he got to knock things over, right? That could be fun. All the same, he avoided looking at his reflection as he packed up his clothes, storing the bag in a cubby before stepping out for mom's approval.

"Why are you walking like that?" She asked.

"The tights feel weird and my legs feel all exposed."

"Well, quit it." She teased. "You're a mouse, not a swan. Or duck. Or whatever bird you're mimicking. Alexander the mouse.
“Alex, mom!”

“Here, try this." She did what looked almost like a squat with her hands turned out to her sides.

"What is that?"

"It's called a plié, it's a ba- dance move." She gestured for him to do it. He tried it, but he could tell by her face he did it wrong.

"Never thought I'd see my son plié in a leotard." She murmured to herself. "Alright, let's get your whiskers on." Whiskers were only the beginning. She adjusted his ears and even the bottom of his leotard, having the classic maternal lack of respect for her son's personal space. Was this all worth it? Mom was going to owe him. "Oh, Fran! I have your missing mouse right here." He turned to look at the woman his mom had beckoned to. "I gotta get going. Francine will get you where you need to be." Just like that, his mom vanished and Alex passed into Francine's care.

"Hello there! Don't you look lovely? Your ears are, here, let's just." She fixed the hood so that it perfectly framed his face. "Perfect! My name's Francine, you can call me Fran. And you are?"

"Alex."

"Wonderful! Let's get going over to the others." She looked as if she might take his hand, but thought better of it as she led him over to a group of kids dressed like him. Well, half of them were.

"How come some of them are wearing pants?" He felt even more self-conscious in his tights and snug leotard.

"Did your mom not tell you? The boys threw a fit about the

tights, so we decided the boys will wear pants and you girls will just stick with the tights." Great, Alex thought. I'm not just a mouse, I'm a girl mouse. Wait a second, did that mean he was filling in for a girl? Mom had not mentioned that, or had she? "Alright, mice to me please!" The children gathered around. "Don't you all look good? This is Alice"

"Alex."

"She'll be evening out our numbers today. Girls, would you mind explaining to her what you're doing? I've got to dash off and check on a few... hundred other things. But I'll be back before showtime!"

"It's pretty simple, right?" Alex said as the girls converged around him to judge their new member. The boys, he noticed, had shuffled off to a nearby corner.

"It's pretty easy, right? We run around, wreck stuff?"

"Oh, the boys run around and wreck things. We get the fun part."

"Fun?" He did not like the sound of this.

"We're going to skip around in a line, holding each other's tails"

"Gently"

"And blowing kisses." His face contorted.

"Who came up with that idea?"

"We did. It's fun!"

"We should probably practice since Alice"

"It's Alex."

"Is an understudy."

"I think I get it." Alex said, but it was no use. He could have sworn he caught a few knowing smirks from the watching boys as the girls absorbed him into their line.

"Grab the tail in front of you with your upstage hand. That means your left since we're entering from this side. And then you'll blow kisses with your right hand."

"Blow kisses at who?" She shrugged as if it really did not matter.

"The boys, the audience, wherever."

"Ready? Three, two, one, skip!" The boy mice rolled their eyes as the girls began to skip around in a circle, giggling and blowing kisses. Alex felt downright mortified, but he was so close to the girls, he could not stop skipping for a second or risk getting trampled on.

"Oh! Lovely, girls." Fran said when she returned, clasping her hands excitedly. "Alice fit in so well, I can hardly - there you are, dear!" She smiled at Alex. "I'm glad you got at least a little rehearsal in." She looked at all the mice as if counting. "Alright, we've got just a few minutes before showtime, so I want you all to remember backstage etiquette. Nice and quiet, kay?" They all nodded, including Alex. It was only a few minutes, right?

Alex had no idea what the rest of the show was like. He stayed backstage with the mice until it was their scene. The girls sat around him, whispering and giggling. The boys sat a short distance away in a tight ring, bent over something that lit up their faces in an electronic glow.

"Hey" one of the girls patted his arm.

"Huh?"

"Is your name Alex or Alice? I couldn't really tell with all the noise."

"Alex." He felt a bit of relief.

"Oh, ok. That's pretty." She turned back to her friend and carried on a whispered conversation, leaving him wondering if she had heard him right or if everyone still thought he was Alice.

Somehow, their scene seemed to last both five seconds and five hours. Alex dutifully blew a few kisses, but mostly watched as the boys gleefully threw pillows around, took paintings off of the walls, and even managed to flip over the couch. The boys dashed off stage and the girls did one last skipping lap before following them.

"We did it!" The girls shifted seamlessly from their single file line to a group hug, including Alex. "Now we just wait for curtain call."

Curtain call proved to be more of the same. The boys trod in from one side of the stage and the girls skipped in from the

other, meeting in the middle to bow as a unified group. It was only when they were halfway through their third bow that Alex realized how surprised he was the girls did not have to curtsey. What a relief!

The show over, backstage changed from near-silence to pandemonium. Out of habit, Alex followed the other mice, unsure of where they all had to go. The answer soon presented itself as they headed toward the changing rooms. Where had he left his clothes? Oh, right, the changing room on the left. As they neared the changing room, he noticed the group start to split. The boys were heading to the changing room on the right, the girls going toward the left. Mom had set him up! How had he not noticed the 'women's' sign by the door earlier?

"Let's get changed. Come on, Alice!" Well, he thought as he shuffled toward the changing room with the rest of the tights-clad mice. At least no one would think he was Alice five minutes from now.