

Chapter 3: Mouse

I'm not quite sure how I ended up here. No, that's a lie; the city bus brought me. I caught it just outside the prison wall and rode it, not knowing where else to go, all the way to the end of the line. I remember stepping off in Harlem, breathing in the scent Hudson and thinking: "So this is what freedom smells like."

It stunk.

It was summer, incredibly hot. What didn't smell of garbage reminded me of rotten fish mixed with something ugly and sharp like urine. Gangs of scientists sat on the stoops, staring at me menacingly. Okay, they were probably trying to focus through their bifocals, but it might as well have been a threat in their eyes. I wasn't one of them. I didn't belong there.

The problem was, I didn't belong anywhere. I had about forty credits, American, left on the credit-counter the prison had issued me on my release. It was meant to be taxi fare to the halfway house. Halfway to what? A mundane job? Who would take me, anyway? It wasn't like I could even do a simple clerical job. I couldn't even interface with a factory. I had no LINK. I still had mouse.net thanks to a dark miracle Satan had performed for me, but... well, that was hard to explain to a perspective employer in any way that didn't make me sound stark-raving loony. Possibly worse, I had a résumé that went something like this: "Built world's largest illegal shareware program. Made bid for world domination. Failed. Jailed. Escaped. Ran afoul of the Inquisition, and may have been instrumental in pulling world from brink of Armageddon. Jailed again."

Not a lot of good references there.

So I stood on the street corner of Harlem and Nowhere and stared out at the rotten freedom. I just stood there, motionless, for hours. I finally decided to duck into a café when the sun went down and the rain started.

That was all I did for weeks. I rode the bus around the city and sulked. I started mumbling to myself about the unfairness of it all. I mean, fuck me. I was back exactly where I started. I'd been homeless, LINKless, when the Aswan Dam broke. Out of that nightmare I forged mouse.net. I had been only fourteen. I was forty-something now, and out of this one, I could only see more blackness and ruin.

I was completely out of brilliant ideas.

I don't remember who found whom first. I have to imagine it was one of the angels who recognized me, took pity on me. Malachim. How hilarious is that? A Jewish angel--rescuing me, a Muslim. I don't even recall his name anymore, or even if he was a he. Honestly, the more I think about it, the more I swear that he was a she... or something like that. Anyway, he had fantastic legs, which the conservative tea-length skirt couldn't hide. I think I may have commented on them, wondering out loud how a guy could find such simple, yet elegant leather shoes in size 15.

That's when things get murky. I mean, when did I agree to come here, to this strange little schoolhouse commune, and offer to spend my days helping a bunch of secular humanist hippies siphon off juice from the city in exchange for a roof over my head? Especially since half the people here identified as Zionists, a third were ex-Israeli soldiers used to shooting at little Arabs like myself, and the rest were just plain fruitcakes and mutant Gorgons. A smarter man would have said thanks, but no thanks, you can stuff your freaky "kibbutz," and hightailed it

back to life on the street. I might have figured out something sooner or later. You never know. Right?

Then, I discovered Dee was here--she of the Haines size six, bikini-cut underwear that had fueled the fantasies of many a long evening in prison.

That should have cinched it. I should have run, screaming. I mean, what could I have been thinking, agreeing to stay?

I was thinking Dee was the only person I knew in New York, even if she did hate my guts. Dee had probably been on my mind the instant I stepped off that bus. I knew she was out in the Glass somewhere, out beyond Harlem. I just didn't know how to get there, how to find this roving commune--especially if it didn't want to be found. It's not like a person could just go wandering through the Medusa. You had to have an invite and an environmental suit.

I'm sure that I had no idea what to say to Dee if I'd found her. I mean, what kind of opening gambit do you try after all this time? "Oh, hi, remember me? I'm the guy who tried to kill you once during my quest for world domination. The guy you had arrested and thrown into prison." And then what, did I ask for a place to stay? A job? Forgiveness? Just one, small kiss?

Truth is, I still haven't figured out what to say to her. There haven't been any opening lines, no rushed apologies, nor any big reunions or showdowns. Just the occasional nod of acknowledgment of two fellow commune-mates who pass each other in the hall, and one awkward, clumsy stumble and clash of body parts, as she was headed out of the bathroom when I was rushing in.

I kind of savor that stumble, honestly. I remember how the scent of cinnamon clung to her wet hair, the softness of the terry cloth robe wrapped tightly around her waist, and, how, when we'd righted ourselves we discovered something I found deeply, earth-movingly sexy.

We were exactly the same height.

I'd always been very self-conscious of the fact that I'm tiny for a man, not much more than five foot six. Most of the time my size was a vague inconvenience, a minor embarrassment. But, looking directly into Deidre's eyes, it was suddenly something else. It was hot. In fact, I was reminded of sex. For, most of the time, the only time I'm eye to eye with a lover is when we were lying down, in bed. It thrilled me to know that neither of us had to look up or down to meet each other's gaze.

I'd gotten an erection on the spot, and thinking back on it now threatens to cause a repeat performance. Which would be extremely bad timing, since I'm currently squatting in a tiny crawlspace with a bunch of men--Israeli men--trying to hook the commune up to the city grid without causing a big-ass blip on the energy commissioner's interface.

"Ready, Mouse?"

I nod, do my wire-cutting thing, and hold my breath. I'm not sure what I'm thinking will happen. Any alarms that might go off would be heard on the LINK, something I'm not supposed to be privy to. A devil gave me part of my LINK back, but the cops watch me like a hawk, and I don't want to get us all bust. So, instead, I look around at the guy's faces. Nobody looks more nervous than they did ten minutes ago. I let out my breath, and continue with the hot wire. In thirty seconds I'm done--a personal best. The guy next to me, whose name I've never learned, tries out the ammeter. He gives us the thumbs up. We're done here.

"Mazel tov," someone says, and there are muted cheers.

"Good work. Thanks, Mouse." Men say, and pat my shoulders all comrade-like, as I pack up my tools. Their hands make a squishing noise on my environmental suit. I nod and give them the "it was nothing" hand wave. I find myself lingering, spending just a little more

time than is necessary to put the tools neatly in the slots of the leather pouch. I look up to see that couple of guys are waiting for me.

“Go on,” I tell them. “I just want to finish up here.”

“You sure?”

I smile. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll be fine.”

Truth is, I’m better off on my own. They must see my need for alone time in my eyes, because they take the hint and trot off to join the others. The muffled but high-spirited laughter disappears down the trade tunnel as the men move further away. My shoulders relax a touch. I take a deep breath.

I’ve gotten used to the fact that I’m surrounded by Jews and Israelis, although admittedly I twig about that occasionally. Cultural conditioning, what can I say? I’m trying to get over it. Honestly.

Mostly what gets me jumpy is that I’m never a hundred percent comfortable in the company of men, and for some reason this little raiding party had been all guys. The all-male environment reminds me too much of prison, I guess --or maybe boarding school, although it’s hard to tell, since the experiences were so very similar. Anyway, the whole uber-testosterone thing makes the hairs on the back of my neck stick up funny. Maybe I was a lesbian separatist in a past life or something.

I trudge down the service tunnel back toward the commune. The concrete turns to glass in about a kilometer. I stop to admire it. The Medusa, in its weird way, is a kind of improvement on the dirty gray. The glass glitters like ice, like leopard-skin ice, or ice with floaty-bits stuck in it. See, the Medusa nanobots turn whatever they come across into glass, except of course anything that started out glass. Glass is made from sand, and so is concrete, so the glass here is full of funky impurities.

I re-check the seals on my environmental suit, and step onto the glass. I’m able to turn off the flashlight attached to my helmet, since light finds its way through several feet of glass. I look up and get a weird tingle in my stomach. The place feels like a funhouse, and a person could get completely disoriented if the commune boys hadn’t painted the floor black weeks ago. The paint will change eventually into glass, but the process is fairly slow.

I concentrate on the black line the rest of the way to the schoolhouse basement. Halfway there, the glass disappears again, and I’m surrounded by ugly, dark concrete. Once at the door, I punch the secret code into the lock, and am, as usual, vaguely surprised they continue to let me in. The door opens to the boiler room, which smells of dust and grease and neglect. The only light comes from a string of Christmas lights one of the Gorgons must have taped haphazardly to the ceiling. They blink green, red, and gold. They’re new; their power comes courtesy of our recent siphon hack.

The suit’s boots make a muffled sound as I stomp up the metallic stairway. The door is heavy, and I grunt as I push it open to... noise. Laughter and shouting comes from the showers. Gorgons yelling at each other as they race down the hallways. I hear some people engaged in a debate or loud conversation at the top of the stairs.

It’s always like this here. It’s like quiet is a word for other people.

I cringe as a Gorgon, who flashes past me in her birthday suit, squeals in the painful octave. A gaggle--or murder--of similarly naked Gorgon girls sprint after her. I dodge them as best I can, mostly by plastering myself to the wall of metal lockers. Watching their wet butts jiggle down the hallway, I frown. I could actually go for a little quiet now and again. I know it doesn’t seem like me. I’m usually a very social boy. But lately, there’s a lot of shit happening

in my head. I've actually taken to thinking, to reflecting, to, Allah save me, taking a "personal inventory"--and I find it's kind of hard to ponder effectively when people are shouting in your ear all the time.

I sigh, and go to hang up my suit in my locker.

How did I end up here, again?

I spin the combination and slide up the handle with a jerk. The door swings open to reveal a picture printed out from the LINK of a woman with crazy-blond curls and smart, penetrating blue eyes.

Oh right. Love.

With a sigh, I shut the door of the locker, and then nearly jump out of my skin. Frank Delapalana, my parole officer, is standing in the hallway of the commune. Frank looms. It's not just his height, which is considerable, which makes him seem large. Frank is former heavyweight boxer. He's got the broken nose, cracked teeth, and permanent scowl to prove it.

"Peace be upon you," Frank says. Well, really it's more of a rumble full of gravel and hiss.

Frank is also a Muslim, which is part of why I think he was assigned to me. Problem is, Frank is a Black Muslim, raised on Farrakhan and New York neighborhoods, while I'm Sunni, weaned on Sufi poetry and Cairo opium dens. He's half Italian, half African American; I'm an African national. Two more different cultures I could not imagine. It's like having a Japanese guy assigned to one from India because they're both Asian.

"Walaikum as sala'am back at ya, buddy," I reply.

His frown deepens and his eyes slowly sweep across my environmental suit. "You finally got a job, Chris?"

Nobody calls me "Chris." Sure, it's a legitimate shortening of my given name, which happens to be Christian El-Aref, but friends and enemies alike usually call me Mouse. He calls me Chris to irritate me, and it's working.

"No, Francis," I say. "I've been sending out resumes, but damned if no one wants to hire a slagged ex-con."

"Hmph." He gives me a sour glare along with the grunt. "That's why I'm here. Your bills are piling up."

He means what I owe the government for his services, of course. Tell me if that isn't fucked up? I'm expected to pay to have this bozo to harass me. "Okay. So what gives? I mean, I'm not due in your office for three days. And, anyway, isn't this commune supposed to be super-secret?"

He just raises an eyebrow. Of course, it's understood that it's down to me that Frank knows exactly where the commune is. The feds ticked me when they gave me parole. A tick is a self-burying microchip that sends out a neon "I'm here!" to any uniform within a fifty-mile radius. The commune knows I'm ticked because I showed up as a bright red dot on the police scanner I helped them install, but we have a "gentleperson's agreement" not to talk about it. I had thought I'd had something similar with Frank--i.e., he gives me the illusion that I'm a free man by letting me come to him.

"I think I found you some work."

"And this couldn't wait?" My heart thuds hard against my ribs looking into the serious expression on Frank's face. When cops offer guys like me a job, it's never good.

"It's one of them timely things."

"Is it?" My voice breaks in a squeak. I hate that, so I try to act cool by jamming my hands into the pockets of the environmental suit only to realize there aren't any. My palms slide along the slick thighs for a moment until I attempt a recovery by folding my arms up to cross in front of my chest. Merciful Allah, could I be less smooth?

Frank watches all this with a slight smile. "Maybe we should talk somewhere private."

I look down the hallway. The Gorgon girls are long gone, but occasionally heads pop out of the shower area to look nervously at Frank and me. He's the one who picked a public place to talk to me. He could have just as easily met me in the library, where I live. I shake my head; why let him intimidate me in a quiet, inaccessible place? No, at least people would hear me scream here. "There is no such place as private here. This is a commune."

Frank glares at me. I glare back. It's not like I don't know what he's going to offer. He's going to ask me to be an informer for the cops. The big question is not what I'm going to do, but upon whom I'm going to be forced to spy.

"Just so you know, I'd rather go back to prison than squeal on these people," I say as a kind of preemptive strike.

Frank nods, like he was expecting that. "How do you feel about hackers?"

I can't help the choking expression that flits across my face every time I hear that label. "Gah! I assume you mean crackers, not wannabes."

The distinction is lost on Frank. "Whatever."

Now my hackles are really raised. The government is supposed to think that I'm slag. Only the devil and I know that I still have access via mouse.net. "What makes you think I could get back in tight with my people? I mean, I'm kind of a marked man. It's not like my history with your fine institutions isn't a matter of public record. Everybody knows I've been nuked."

"Do they?" Frank makes it sound like a statement, not a question. "What exactly do you do for your bread and water here?"

"I'm the house-wizard. You know that. I fix broken electronic stuff."

Frank looks at the overhead fluorescent bulbs snapping with stolen city power. "Uh-huh."

"Okay," I admit. "And other stuff. But none of that is going to impress your average wire-wiz. Besides, my best crack is decades out of date. I'm a dinosaur to these kiddies."

"But you have a reputation, don't you?"

"Yeah, but no access."

He gives me a hard stare. Every cop I've ever known has a passable steely eyed glare. I wonder if they teach that look in cop school.

"Are you offering to reconnect?" I ask, even though I know he can't, because it can't be done.

"Are you willing to do the job?"

"Can I really say no?"

"Of course you can," Frank says. "I'd have to mark down that you refused employment, but you can do whatever you like."

Right. My parole gets revoked if I can't find a job within a year either way, but refusing a job is like asking to go back. I give up with a heavy sigh. "All right. Lay it on me. Who's this master criminal you want me to narc on?"

"Deidre McMannus."