

Chapter 7: Mouse

I absently watch Amariah fumble awkwardly with the door, my heart doing a frantic, happy dance in my chest. A night out with Dee--it's a dream come true.

It's a fucking nightmare.

My thumb strokes the leather wristband of the dick tracy Frank forced on me even after I told him that a new phone on a nuked cracker was a dead give-away that I was squealing. I still can't believe I said yes. I'm a paid informant on my one and only bikini-cut, size six; I'm not quite sure what possessed me. Actually, that's not true. I know exactly why I did it. I did it fully intending to be a double agent. I did it so I could know what dirt the coppers could possibly have on Dee. I did it hoping to protect her from them.

Only now, staring at the frosted glass doors that Amariah disappeared through, I'm not sure it was such a good idea--especially since I know I have to call Frank right now and tell him everything. Otherwise, when my ticked ass blips at a mudder party tonight, I'm as good as busted. Sure, a hit-and-run is only a felony if drugs are involved, but a rave without drugs is like a fish without gills. I'm sure there are exceptions, but I can't imagine one. Besides, gamers and wizards are like two animals of the same genus. I'm not supposed to associate.

Not without permission, anyway.

I grab my jacket from the wooden coat rack near the door. I don't want to call Frank from here. It'd probably be safe, but it just doesn't feel right--too Judas in the fold. Besides, I'm far too antsy to sit still. I'd like to run screaming, but walking briskly away seems like an okay compromise.

Taking a deep breath, I plunge out into the hallway. The library is on the second floor--a.k.a. Gorgon Central. "My room"/"your room" really doesn't mean much to the average Gorgon, so this level is by far the most communal. The doors to all the classrooms are propped wide open, with people hunting in packs looking for the coolest conversation, warmest food, or softest bed. The hallways are lined with a gauntlet of chattering Gorgons in various states of dress, whose long, pale white legs I gingerly step over on my way to the staircase. It always sounds like a party is happening on my floor, no matter what time it is. Soft guitar music drifts from several of the open doors, and I can smell cheese fondue coming from one of the rooms. With their penchant for dumpster diving, I'm only a little concerned about where the Gorgons found the fondue pot... or the cheese.

"Hey, where you headed, Mouse?"

I look down to see Fang sitting on the floor, his head cradled in the lap of some Gorgon whose name--or gender--I've never learned. "I'm going to try out the walkway, Fang."

"Ah," he says with a wicked smile. "The mouse is going without a net. Very brave for a rodent. Good luck, human."

"Yeah, uh, thanks."

Because going back and forth from the commune in a full environmental suit is such a hassle, the Gorgons built a "safe" trail for us norms. Even so, not a lot of people dare to take it. The Gorgons', shall we say, unique sense of feng shui and the glass's tendency to swallow materials means the trail twists and detours and requires a certain amount of agility from its

travelers. Last time I tried it, I only got half way before I gave up and backtracked. Let's just say when I found myself going hand-over-hand monkey-bars style on the rungs of a ladder stretched across a glittering chasm between glassed parking ramps, I decided I'd had enough.

Today, I want the challenge. Besides, I can count on being alone out there.

I jog up the stairs. An enormous blue and white Israeli flag hangs over the window on the landing. It marks the transition from Gorgon Central to what I like to call "upper management." The men and women who live on the third floor are the people who make things happen for the commune. They're the ones who broker the midnight deals with the Amish farmers for our food supply. They make sure the city officials are paid off so our quasi-legal existence can continue uninterrupted by bothersome raids. They organize and wheel-and-deal and decide who stays and who goes. In essence: they're my bosses.

Deidre has a room up here.

Frank confirmed something I always suspected. Dee leads this commune. Deidre's college roommate and my ex-roommate's ex-girlfriend, Rebeckah, who founded the commune, is currently in prison for having shot an Inquisitor in the head. Dee is what you call an "acting director," only there's no acting involved. Rebeckah isn't coming back. Rebeckah is one of those people--like me, actually--who, once the authorities get their hands on, they're extremely loathe to let go of.

Considering that Rebeckah helped avert the war of Armageddon, you'd think that the French would be a little more forgiving and let her out. I guess they decided they were being especially lenient when they waved the death sentence. Maybe if it were really up to the French, they would. Rebeckah's problem is that she pissed off the Order of the Inquisition. You just don't kill an Inquisitor, even one demonically possessed by a corrupt version of my Page program, without some serious fall-out.

Even so, my lawyer could probably get her out. After all, if he could spring me, he could free Satan from Dante's seventh level of hell. I offered, but Rebeckah refused my lawyer's services--even when he agreed to do the work pro bono. She's turned down all my overtures. I don't know why. I can only suspect it has to do with her freakish sense of justice. Or maybe the French have better prison food. Allah only knows.

I have to walk past Deidre's room to get to the stairs that will take me to the roof and to the Gorgon's walkway, but I'm still standing at the edge of the hallway, trying to distract myself from the task at hand by contemplating Rebeckah's fate. My hand clutches the railing of the step, not letting go. I'm not sure what I'm more afraid of--seeing Dee or not. Time to be a good Muslim and leave it to the will of Allah.

Except I'm a terrible Muslim.

I should walk forward, but not even my brain wants to stay on task. I keep thinking about completely unrelated stuff, like, I wonder how Page is doing and why he hasn't called yet today? And what ever did happen to Victory, the corrupt copy of Page? I let my mind ramble down memory lane for a while surrendering completely to avoidance. In fact, I'm about to give Page a buzz via mouse.net when Allah, apparently, loses patience with me.

"Are you lost? Or stuck?"

Deidre doesn't sound pleased to see me. She doesn't look it, either. Her thin, blonde eyebrows are drawn in tightly over a pair of china blue eyes. Eyes, precisely level with mine, remind me again of sex. Adding to this problem is her hair, which is either completely lacking style or meticulously coifed to look like she just stumbled out of bed. I think she has clothes on, but I can't be sure, because my mind is utterly focused on the idea of waking up next to Deidre.

"Mouse, are you on drugs?"

"Yes, pheromones." Yours.

Deidre blinks, like she can't believe what I just said. "Sorry?"

I shake my head. I can't trust myself not to say what I'm thinking and I can't stay here any longer or Deidre will know exactly what's on my mind. I struggle to sound normal, as I squeak: "We're out of milk. I'm going for a walk. To get some."

Then I dash down the hall like my pants are on fire, which they kind of are, but only in the worst possible way.

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When I finally stop running, I'm surrounded by glass. The trail of two-by-fours ends abruptly in front of me. The Medusa has claimed my next step, which once may have been a pile of clothes. Now the folds in the fabric look more like curvy pastel worms frozen in lumpy ice. It doesn't look sturdy, even if I could find pieces big enough for footholds.

I'm also reminded that I forgot to slip on some rubber boots. Usually, when I take the walkway, I like the added sense of protection wellies give me. Now I should probably throw away these shoes when I get back--just to be safe. Even though it's highly unlikely, you never know when you might pick up a stray nanobot.

I put my hands on my knees and try to catch my breath. I've been going full tilt since I left Deidre. I'm not even entirely sure where I am. Ironically, there's a street sign on the corner, but it's completely translucent. The sun shines brightly through it, letters and all. Old electrical wires crisscross above my head, like the glittering web of a giant crystal spider.

The buildings around me cast deep shadows across the street, however, because they're only partially decomposed. Their exteriors are glass, but, where the sun hits them, their guts are clearly visible. I can see pictures hanging on back walls, sofas, chairs, tables, toilets, tubs, ovens, cabinets, sinks, beds, desks... all still arranged as they were the day the bomb hit. It's a weird look--like being surrounded by life-size doll's houses opened up on hinges. And full of ghosts.

Bodies are in there somewhere. People who couldn't get out when the glass struck and who starved to death.

It's a perfect place to sell my soul.

So I dial Frank's number. I'm disappointed when he picks up on the second ring. Actually, it's his avatar that answers. The avatar appears as a floating New York City cop badge.

"Merciful Allah!" I say as I slam my hand over the faceplate of the wrist-phone. Note to self: hack into Frank's personal file and change his avatar into something more palatable, say, like a hot pink unicorn or something.

"El-Aref?" I hear Frank's muffled voice through my fingers.

I don't get the pleasure of an interface, since I can't let him know that I have access. Removing my fingers, I show him my ugly mug. "It is I," I say, with a wave.

"You're not supposed to call unless you have something to report."

"Oh, yes, well, what was I thinking? Here I thought I'd just wander out into the glass so we could just have a nice little chat about the weather. I heard it's supposed to rain tomorrow, but I don't know. My knees aren't aching, and they're always such a good barometer."

Frank still isn't showing his face, so I stare at the badge for a while. I swear it seems to be frowning. Finally, he says, "What have you got?"

"I'm going to a rave tonight. Don't bust me, okay?"

The badge flickers and then Frank's dark face fills the screen. He's gotten a haircut. His scalp glistens on the sides of head; the only hair remaining is a thin patch of black fuzz on the top. It's not a good look. When he frowns, which seems to be often, he resembles a pit bull. "A rave? Are there going to be other wizards there?"

"I don't know. Probably," I say honestly. "It's a gaming thing."

"I take it you're going with her."

"You're a very intuitive fellow," I say. "Are you an Aquarius?"

"Taurus," he says with no inflection. Of course: the bull. "Okay, Mouse, you've got a deal. I'll let downtown know about your little party. Any idea where it is?"

I wave a dismissive hand. "You know how these things are. I'm sure it'll be moving. I imagine it's some kind of hit-and-run. Listen, you need to give me a hint. What exactly am I trying to find out about Deidre?"

His light green eyes seem to watch warily me from the other side of the phone.

"Everything."

"Everything? Like, I'm supposed to take notes on what kind of salad she prefers with dinner?" Caesar. I already know that one, but I'm not going to tell Frank that. "Her favorite color?"

"Mostly we just want a sense of where she's going and who she's with."

I give Frank my best skeptical look. "Either that's a big fat lie or you're wasting my considerable talents. If all you wanted some idiot to follow Dee around, I can't believe that your boys in blue couldn't tap a minor player at the commune to do that. The place is full of ex-cons. A car thief could do foot work. You made it sound like Dee was a card-carrying member of the Invisible Tribe. Is she or isn't she?"

Frank wets his lips, apparently considering how much to trust me with. "We think so."

I wait for a moment, expecting more. He just stares at me, as if daring me to read his mind. "And, what? You want confirmation of that?"

"Partly."

I take a deep breath and count to ten.

Luckily Frank starts before I have to prompt him again. "We think she's abetting a major nano-scientist."

I'm still not getting it. The commune is full of scientists. Thanks to the Medusa, most "hard" sciences--like physics and math--have fallen out of favor to the point of being outlawed in America. But even the physicists don't like nano-scientists. They're considered major villains, but not for the reasons you might think. Sure, the nano-techies were directly responsible for the mistake that keeps the glass in the Medusa sites "hot," but that's not the big gripe.

No, the other scientists hate the nano-folks because of their exempted status. The LINK, you see, is all about nanobots. The inside, head shit is built by nanos. So nano-techies are a kind of necessary evil. Hospitals employ them. They get grants to study and experiment. They still publish journal articles and hold conferences in swanky resort hotels. They get to wear their white coats with pride.

"Abetting," I repeat. "As in abetting a criminal."

"Yes," Frank says unhelpfully.

"A criminal nano-techie."

"Think it through, Mouse."

I look around the glassed street. I hear an irritated caw as, above, a crow soars between the buildings being dive bombed by two much smaller birds.

"But," I say, as the sound retreats into the distance. "I thought all the original Medusa team got lynched."

"We did too."

It was like saying that they just discovered Hitler never died in the bunker, but was living as your next door neighbor. My mouth went dry. I could hardly process it. A Titan? Living in my commune?

My first memories are of the war. Cairo missed getting glassed, but, even though Egypt was an ally of the superpowers, "friendly fire" hit many of its oil fields. I remembered the refugees, and how the army had orders to shoot anyone who dared to bring the Medusa infection into the city--even those begging for mercy as the glass froze their blood and they suffocated to death. Cairo smelled of death for years.

Like everyone, I cheered when I saw the pictures of the mob torching the offices of the Titan Project. When I heard the team had been hung from lampposts in downtown Washington, D.C., I didn't shed a single tear for them or their families. Admittedly, I started to feel little uncomfortable with the witch-hunt that followed. Most people agreed that things had gone too far when severed heads of scientists--only tangentially related to the Medusa bomb--decorated the fence around the U.S. Capitol building.

I still think the ban on science was stupid, however.

But, if I could go back in time, I'm not sure I'd have spared the Titan Project team's life. They were irresponsible in the highest order. Millions died because of their mistake.

"Who?" I finally find myself asking. "Which one?"

"The queen bitch," Frank says.

Maxine Mann, the project lead. I'm floored; Hitler is living with me. "No, no way," I say with a shake of my head. "There's too many people living at the commune. Someone would recognize her. Mann's face is infamous. Anyway, even if this is true, I'm not sure how I can help find her. I've never been a nano-expert."

"No? What about that stunt you pulled with Amariah?"

Except, it wasn't me that jump started Rye's nexus. Dee had worked most of that mojo. Thinking back, I had been awfully impressed with the scope of Dee's understanding of the nexus and the inner workings of the 'bots. Of course, I'm often blown away by Dee's brain. It's the third hottest thing about her. Besides, smart chicks always turn me on.

But, now I'm feeling all creepy and weird and complicated. Could it be true? Did Dee's expertise come second-hand, straight from the mother of all nanos?

"That was a one-off," I say, unwilling to bust Dee's part in Rye's awakening.

Frank shakes a finger at me. "It better have been. It's a federal offense, Chris. You best keep that in mind."

"Whatever," I say. Federal Offense is my middle name. I'm more interested in the Dee-Medusa connection. "So I'm supposed to draw out Mann through Dee? How is that supposed to work?"

"That's your problem. Just find out what you can."

"But I'm a wire-wizard, not a nano-technician."

Frank sighs, clearly losing patience with me. "Mann respects wizards. Apparently that's why she's there. You and McMannus have a powerful reputation. My guess is that eventually she'll approach you with some kind of offer."

"What the fuck makes you say that? What kind of offer?"

"Privileged information. Go enjoy your rave."

The phone clicks off.
"Great."

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Thanks to several wrong turns and a detour that wasn't, I make it back to the commune with very little time to spare if I want to check out the game one last time. I strip off my shoes and deposit them in the biohazard garbage can that sits at the top of the stairs. My favorite sneakers, I sigh, as head to the basement for a quick shower and a shave.

Of course, the shower isn't empty. I get the pleasure of soaping up with a number of Gorgons and one soldier. Luckily, I have a lot of recent practice with the group experience, so I just keep my eyes on the wall. At least the water pressure here is good, and the solar panels on the roof keep things nice and toasty. A guy could almost relax. Except I keep thinking about what Frank said.

Shutting off my water, I pad over to the lockers to get my shaving kit. I just don't get it. Why would Dee, who is also old enough to remember the war, harbor someone like Maxine Mann? And, how is it that no one else seems to know this? I can barely walk into the sink area without tripping over someone.

"Sorry," I mutter.

This is not a good place to hide.

Glancing over at the soldier guy using the sink next to me, I wonder. Then, again, maybe it is. I don't know this guy's name for instance, even though we nod at each other all comrade-like when he notices me staring. For all I know, he's actually some stranger who wandered in off the street. Sure, the commune has monthly meetings, but "membership" is really very fast and loose, particularly among the Gorgons. Occasionally, even poseur Gorgons end up living with us for a while, before the real deal souse them out.

With little white hair dye, reflective contacts, and some anti-aging cream, a person could disappear. Of course, that'd be Maxine Mann's biggest problem. She's got to be in her seventies, if not older. Winkles ain't gonna pass for a mutie, they don't live that long.

Still.

Something to keep my eyes out for.

I find myself scanning the faces of the Gorgons that line the hallways as I make my way back to the library. Nothing unusual stands out. Once inside the library, I check my wrist phone for the time. I've got about an hour before I have to meet Dee for the rave.

An old reference desk takes up the entire far corner of the library. The desk is a semi-circular half-wall whose sides are made out of cheap plywood covered with nubby orange carpet. The top is hard plastic of a very similarly sickening shade. A very elegant look, I think, because, after all, brilliant tangerine furry-stuff never goes out of style.

I really shouldn't complain, though. I've got the biggest living quarters of anyone in this commune, and a lot of privacy, really. You can't even see my bed when you come in the library. That's better than a lot of folks who have to sleep in the middle of old classrooms.

I pass through the hinged half-door into my little nest. I grab a bottle of water from the mini-refrigerator tucked under the desk, and throw myself down on my futon. I built the frame myself from recycled wooden pallets and it groans wearily when my full body weight hits it. The mattress I actually ordered off the LINK. A luxury, but it felt worth it after all those years sleeping on a prison cot. Same with the flannel sheets and the down comforter; I have had enough of government issue, industrial grade linens to last a lifetime. Anyway, it didn't actually

cost me anything. I stole it. I mean, what's the point of being a wire-wizard if you can't occasionally use your powers for evil and scam some free shit off the LINK?

Before settling in, I set my Mickey Mouse alarm clock. I could set a reminder on mouse.net, but I've discovered I can "snooze" internal alarms way too easily. Better to have to physically get up and hunt around for the damn noisemaker. I place the clock on a shelf out of arm's reach and double-check the time.

Okay. Deep breath, Mouse.

I practice breathing and slowly work on relaxing my body, muscle by muscle. Shutting my eyes, I snuggle under the comforter. Might as well be comfortable for the deep magic, I always say. Bladder feels empty. I've got water waiting for when I wake up. I'm ready. Let's find out what this game is really like.

#

The thing you need to know about the LINK is this: it's all pretend. Fake. You might experience streets, avenues, skyscrapers, bridges, people, or other nouns, but, in reality, it's all ones and zeros.

Most people forget that. Ninety-five percent of LINK users operate in full-interface mode. They get all five senses: smell, sights, sounds, colors, aches, pains, the works.

Not me.

Back before I got cut off from the LINK, I had special implants that helped strip away the bells and whistles, the flotsam, the crap. Most of that equipment got melted into slag by America's federal prison system. Not all of it, however--some survived. Actually, to be more precise, some of it was revived by the physical manifestation of Satan, but that's a long story and for another day. Suffice to say I have access, limited though it may be, to the tools of my trade. I can still pass as one of the Invisible Tribe. I can still walk behind the curtain.

So, I'm more than a little disturbed to find myself standing, physically present, in front of the gates of the game. I smell an atmosphere heavy with moisture, like the air just before a thunderstorm, and something spicy and familiar, like the crisp scent of rotting oak leaves on a forest floor. The breeze leaves a cool, wet caress as it passes my cheek.

Before me is a scene out of gothic novel. A wrought iron fence looms forbiddingly in front of a dirt road leading to a distant country manor. The gate is locked with one of those square locks with the kind of keyhole that looks like it takes a skeleton key. I push on the door. The metal feels cold and hard under the pressure of my hands, but the door stays shut. My efforts produce a nice rattling sound. I do it again, just to appreciate the wizardry of the code. The clanks are perfect.

There's something familiar about the scene. For a second I swear I can smell the black water of the Nile on the breeze. I shiver at the memory.

Through the slates of the gate, I can only barely see the house. Before me is a deep, wild forest. Whoever programmed the trees spent a lot of time looking at the real things--I can see a master's stroke in each crooked, twisted branch. I have no doubt that if I could get past the gate to touch the bark it would feel rough and real under my "fingertips."

I take a step back. It's weird, though. I hadn't intended to come here like this. I meant to sneak up on the thing, look at its hard-code, without the all pretty in the way.

I back out into the real world to make another pass at it, and damned if I don't end up standing in front of the same gate, with the same familiar, eerie smell on the breeze, the same hoot of a distant owl.

"Page?" I send out a broad call to the artificial intelligence who used to be my avatar. I'm not under any illusions that he belongs to anyone these days. He's his own man--sentience will do that to a person--but he and I have a kind of familial bond that I'm not above taking advantage of.

"Father."

Page appears beside me. He used to look exactly like me, or exactly like I wished I looked on a good day--you know, devilishly handsome with short dark curls and fine Arabic features. Now... Now, I'm not sure I could pick him out of a line-up.

Except for that glowing skull just beneath his translucent skin. That kind of stands out; it's hard to forget.

Otherwise, our skin is still approximately the same color. That is to say, brown. His hair is also black, but where what I have is straight and short, his is a long and uncontrolled mane of wild, twisted locks. Some of it is braided; other bits are dreadlocks. A weird look, but it's the hair of a cello polka diva: Mai Kito. Page spent some time trapped in her head, and it clearly affected him. Hence, the similarly Japanese cast to his eyes.

The metallic skull and see-through skin are the product of Page's latest misadventure, a somewhat hostile take over of a cyborg's combat computer. It's a much less attractive merging, although he got good "clothes" out of the deal. He has the leather uniform jacket of an Inquisitor and seriously ass-kicking jack boots. Otherwise, he wears blue jeans and a white T-shirt almost identical to my default.

He waits patiently for me to speak--another new development, this quietness of his. I'm very... well, a kind term would be "kinetic," but the truth is I'm a bit high-strung and jumpy. To see my reflection so still and unmoving is a little disturbing. I point at the manor on the other side of the iron fence. "What's the deal? Why am I here?"

"You haven't passed the test yet."

"What?"

"You don't have entrance to the game yet. That's why you're still at the gate. I would have thought that was obvious." Page pauses for a moment, then gives me a very scolding look. "Did you call me all the way here to ask me for cheats? I'm not doing that. The Koran forbids..."

"Whoa," I say stopping his recitation of the Noble Koran with a raise of my hand. "No preaching, please. I read the Koran six times in prison. I don't need to hear it again. Anyway, that's not what I was asking, although I am fairly hurt you wouldn't help me break in. I'm trying to figure out why I can't see the code. Can you?"

Page stares at the manor behind the gate. "It's a house in the forest."

"Yes," I say, my tone stretching the word with my impatience. "That's its interface. What is it really?"

"It's a house."

I didn't mean to be grouchy, but Page didn't seem to get what I was asking. "You glitched or something? I'm talking about the hard-code."

"There is no hard-code."

"You need a reboot, boy. That," I point emphatically to the image of the house, "can't be here unless it's coded."

Page narrows his eyes. Through tight lips, he says, "You mean like my soul?"

I frown, mulling that over. Page's sentience is, honestly, a bit of a mystery, even to me. All I can figure is that something happened, something truly magical, or Allah forbid, "spiritual," which made Page more than just the sum of his parts. "You saying that's AI? The whole thing?"

Page nods slowly. "I hadn't thought of that, but that would explain its hunger."

I'm not sure I want to know what Page is talking about, but I have to ask. "Hunger?"

"The game been eating up dead space in the LINK. Reallocating it. Dragon and I noticed it the other day when we were out walking. I saw it eat a temple."

"You saw it transform LINK landscape?" My voice breaks with incredulity.

Page nods.

"Then, it's doing more than eating dead space. It's stealing placeholders, claim markers. That's not cool at all." I jerk my thumb in the direction of the gate. "Who owns this thing?"

"Unknown."

My frown deepens. "You're kidding me, right? Who engineers a game so good it can pass as AI and doesn't advertise their connection to it?"

Page shrugged. "You didn't advertise your connection to mouse.net for years."

Because I was stealing from the LINK, just like this game. I looked at the manor and the gates. "Okay, so they're criminals. But, they aren't hiding," I said, thinking of my own mouse holes. "I barely thought the name Angel of Death and I was brought here. Any LINK-vice cop could do the same."

Page leans against the gate, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I don't think the authorities know about the claims the game has gobbled."

I nod; it makes sense. "Yeah, and the placeholders are probably only semi-legal anyway." I had a few markers like that myself. It is fairly common practice among wire-wizards to stake a claim on underdeveloped areas of the LINK by scripting some pretty, albeit meaningless landscape images. Things that look like abandoned warehouses often signify underutilized LINK-space that someone wants first dibs on. None of these "claims" would hold up in court if a business had other rights to the bandwidth.

I shake my head and continue. "I imagine the game gets away with a lot because they do good business. How much does it cost to play?"

Page raises a thin, almost feminine eyebrow. "It's free. You have to pass their test, then you're a member of the club."

"Funky," I say. "What kind of test?"

"There's a lot of talk about that," Page says. "It appears to be a real-time thing."

"Wait. This game operates in real-time, too?"

Page gives me a sarcastic smile. "You're kind of out of touch, aren't you?"

"I've been busy."

His smile extends into a full-fledged grin. "How is Deidre?"

"Who programmed you to be such a smart-ass?" I raise my hand. "Don't answer that. Deidre is fine. I'm kind of going out with her tonight, if you must know. I'd been hoping to impress her with my knowledge of Soul Stealer here, but I seem to be barred."

Page pushes himself off the gate with his shoulder. He looks concerned when he asks, "Deidre plays?"

"No, but her daughter wants to or something," I say, suddenly not sure if Amariah ever told me why she wanted to know if she could pass as a gamer. "I guess we're going to some mudder rave tonight, though."

"Mudder? You should watch that language if you want an invite," Page said, nodding in the direction of the trees. "The woods have ears."

I grab the bars of the iron gate and shout at the oak trees, "This is Mouse. You know, as in: the Mouse. Send me an invite, you skid freaks!"

"I don't know you," Page says in an embarrassed tone, before he vanishes into thin air.

I sit down, tailor-fashion, on the grass with my back against the gate. I swear I can feel cool dampness of the ground seeping through the material of my jeans. The gate is unyielding and awkward against my shoulder blades. Sun warms the top of my head, despite the cool breeze. I run my fingers through the thick grass, feeling dirt wedge itself between my nails. Yet, no matter how hard I squint at it, I can't see code. It's so good; it's surreal.

I can't be the first wire-wizard to be unnerved by it either.

#

With a thought, I find myself not far from the Algerian Node at a LINK-café called "Café Du Dragon et la Souris," The Dragon and the Mouse. The faux restaurant is a wire-wizard hang out of sorts. All the famous avatars gather here, hoping for a chance to rub shoulders with the two artificial intelligences whose names grace the establishment.

To be precise, the place should really be named The Dragon and the Page, but apparently that didn't have quite the right ring to it. And then the question would be, when they translated the name into French, would they choose page as in squire, or page as in a sheet of paper, or even page as in "oops, my beeper just went off"? I like that in English it can be any of those and more, which is why I gave him the English version when I invented him. I doubt "page" works on so many levels in French; it certainly hadn't in Arabic.

The floor of the café is checked with glowing bookmarks. As I walk over them on the way to the counter, pop-ups (though the irony of a "Mouse-over," isn't lost on me) inform me that Page stood here, the Dragon sat there, Page blew his nose and dropped a piece of e-snot over in that corner, and so on. For a small fee, I can even get a full VR-re-experience of the interaction. Whoa. I think I'll pass.

No one affords any special attention to me, despite the fact that the place is teeming with a late evening crowd. The avatar I wear is fairly unremarkable, particularly in the Arab world (although I don't wear a beard, which could make me stand out in my age group.) I pride myself with the fact that very few people would recognize me as "the Mouse" if they met me on the street. I'm just this guy, you know, and that's the way I like it. The fewer people who can finger me, the better.

Once I make my way to the counter, I ask for "the special." The image of the woman behind the counter gives me the once over. She's an Indian woman in a hot-pink sari with glittering gold trim. Her eyes have been so darkly lined to the point of almost looking like a caricature of her race. I wonder if she has Riki-tiki-tavi twining around her sandals.

"Login?" she requests.

"Mouse," I say.

She bats her large eyes at me for a second, like she doesn't believe me. Finally: "Password?"

"Passwords are for sissies," I quote.

She gives me a broad smile and inclines her head toward the wall to our right. "Greetings, Program. Enter at your own risk."

I walk through the wall, like a ghost. As my avatar's "flesh" passes each layer of wall, I'm sent an encrypted test, open it, and, if I pass, I'm allowed to continue. I make it to the other side without incident.

The "other side" looks a lot like the stereotypical heaven. Bright light and whiteness, and that's about it. It's not much to look at, the idea being if you got this far, you aren't the type to be impressed by LINK-illusion, anyway.

There are three other wizards inside... I think. I'm not entirely certain because my heavy-duty LINK filters got croaked when the prison did its number on me. The other wizards register as a kind of blur against a white background. I can only really see them when they move.

"Mouse, my man. Long time, no e," sends one.

Despite the handshake protocol, I miss the handle completely, but considering the lameness of the joke and how old a person would have to be to think of the LINK as the electronic highway, it could only be one programmer. A guy (or gal, I really didn't know,) I knew as Wren. Wren was one of the originals. He was an architect, one of the designers of the combination biology and technology that made up the LINK. I'd heard through the grapevine that Wren had worked for the American government during the big war developing cyborg soldiers. Rumor had it that he'd beta-tested the hardware on himself and his body was a mess of wires and steel.

"Wren," I say, "please tell me you aren't the guy behind 'greetings, program'?. You know these newbies don't get your obscure, and might I add--extremely dorky--movie references."

"I'm surprised you do," he says.

"Get out. You're the yahoo who got me hooked on flat-screen in the first place."

There's a pause, which makes me strain to try to distinguish features in the whitespace.

"So, it really is you," Wren finally says. "I don't know if you realize this, but you're supposed to be slag."

"I'd heard," I say, trying to put as much sarcasm as possible into plain text.

"Hard line?" Wren asks.

"No," I say. But, I hesitate. I don't want to try to explain how I got mouse.net back, especially since it has to do with Satan. "Actually... yeah. I'm on-the-fly hard-coding all this."

"Yeah, right," says Wren, obviously unconvinced.

"Hey, I've got a bigger mystery," I say. "What's up with Soul Stealer? Do you know any of the pros who worked on it?"

"Argh! You've turned all muddy."

"I have not, either," I protested. "Page tells me the game is converting space holders. Aren't you guys the least bit concerned?"

"I have no interest in cracking a game," Wren says, his text dripping with superiority.

I frown at the blur that I think is him. "Are you feeling okay, Wren? I mean, cracking Soul Stealer is a serious challenge. Did I neglect to mention I can't see its code? Page couldn't either. In fact, Page said the game is going AI, and yet you're telling me you could care less?"

"I'm telling you it's just a game."

I may be imagining it, but I swear there's an ominous undercurrent in Wren's text.

"Honestly," he continues, "I'm more curious how you're operating."

"Has someone sworn you away from the game?" I ask. "Who coded the thing, that's all I want to know. I mean, someone must be laying sig.file on that thing. I would if it were mine."

"Did you find a way to by-pass the melt down command?"

Clearly, Wren has stopped answering my questions. Even so, I try one more. "Hey, if wizards aren't supposed to play, you'd better tell me straight up. I'm wrangling for an invite."

"Does your parole officer know you're connected?"

Holy shit. A threat. From Wren. I disconnect so fast my head hurts.