

Chapter 11: Mouse

Deidre hasn't spoken for the last ten minutes. Silence makes me nervous. I lean against the wall; I twiddle my thumbs; I tap out Biladi, the Egyptian National Anthem, on the wall with my boot heel.

Finally, I break.

"So, hey, Deidre. How've you been?"

She gives me a skeptical look, like she's not sure if I'm really fool-hearty enough to want to ask something that dangerous. I suddenly feel a little less certain, myself. My foot stops tapping.

I try a new tact.

"You think Rye is okay in there?" I jerk my head in the direction of the techno-mariachi.

Dee relents. "Rye's a smart girl. She'd call if she gets in trouble."

Well, we could agree on that. "Yep."

Deidre crosses her arms and goes back to her position against the opposite wall, which she'd been occupying until our recent foray into the crazy, mixed-up world of two-way communication. Since she won't talk to me, I decide to just stare unabashedly.

Dee still dresses like a cop--or at least kind of like a guy cop. Now that the gender-clothing restrictions have been dropped, Dee favors dusty blue jeans that look threadbare enough to pop a seam any second.

No more fancy pumps, either. Now she wears only extremely practical running shoes. The only remnant of the smartly-outfitted Dee I used to know is the soft, cotton white button-down blouse tucked neatly into the jeans, and the expensive-looking caramel-colored trench coat that hangs to her knees.

Somewhere under that big coat is a cattle prod and, most likely, a gun. Strangely, that turns me on. Come to think of it, it's not that strange. Everything about this woman gets me going. I feel like a freaking teenager when she's around.

Not that she would notice. She stares resolutely down toward the rave avoiding even a glance in my direction.

"Would it kill you to make a little nice?" I ask.

She gives me the briefest consideration, then says: "I'm not sure what you want from me, Mouse."

I put on a tough-cop voice, just like in the vids. "Just answer the question, lady. How have you been?"

I get a tiny smile. Then, "Fine. You?"

She gives me an opening; I nearly faint with glee. But then dread strikes my heart: what to say? I had wanted to tell her about my new "arrangement" with Frank, but his information

about the Titan Project has me all in a work. I'm not sure I completely trust Dee. It's a very weird feeling, and I find myself staring at my toes.

When I realize I never answered her question, I shrug. "I'm cool."

Deidre looks me up and down. "You are now. What was going on with you this afternoon? Did you ever get that... milk?"

"Oh, that," I say. I quickly change the subject. "No, but I checked out this game, Soul Stealer. Couldn't get past the gate interface."

"A gate?" Deidre is completely engaged now. "That's strange, when I went it was this gothic cemetery."

"Aw, no fair. Why couldn't I have gotten the graveyard? I love that horror stuff." I scratch my chin. "Hey, did you try to source it? Page says he thinks it's an A.I."

"Really?"

"Well, he didn't say so exactly. But, when I told him that the game's behavior was impossible, he said something like, 'What, like me?' so I just kind of figured he meant..."

Dee cuts me off with a wave. "Wait a minute, you've tried to play? Weren't you just in prison? You should be melted down."

"Yeah, I was."

Dee peers at me intently, as if she might spot modifications on my head. "What happened?"

"An angel," I say. Then, after a moment's hesitation, I correct myself. "Well, Satan." She surprises me by getting it. Instantly. "Morningstar."

"How about you?" I ask, tapping the side of my head at the temple where the almond-shaped lump of the LINK receiver still lays dormant. "You never did explain your reconnect."

"An angel," she says, mocking my tone perfectly. "Well, Gabriel."

I raise my eyebrows. "At least your upgrade came from the good guys."

She nods her head and laughs lightly.

"I still can't believe that they're real," I admit.

"Believe it," she says with a slight trace of bitterness.

Right. Michael. The last thing I want Dee to think about is her ex-lover. We seem to have a momentary bond, so I say, "I'm super sorry about trying to shoot you."

Dee's eyes flash with anger and my mouth hangs open, as if to ask: who thought that was a good conversation gambit?

Deidre's face, meanwhile, remains fairly impassive, considering that her eyebrows and jaw muscles leap and contort with the apparent strain of holding back commentary... or, by the look in her eyes, perhaps death threats.

Probably I should stop talking at this point, but apparently I am unable to grasp the concept of backing the hell off. "Seriously, I really wish we could get past that little incident. I mean it was a long time ago. Arguably, you could say I was out of my mind...."

"I don't buy that."

The edge in her voice stops me cold. Finally. "Urh?" I squeak.

"You knew exactly what you were doing, Mouse." She points her finger at me like a gun. I find myself pressing my back against the wall. "First of all, you were laying in wait for me, setting your trap. Secondly, you didn't just try to shoot me. You pulled the trigger. Twice. The first bullet missed, the second was stopped when Morningstar put his hand on the hammer of the gun."

I think back to that stupid, dark day. It was, in fact, the worst day of my life, the day I got caught. Mostly, I remember the embarrassment of exposure, the trapped feeling of the arrest.

But, Dee is right. I did sit on the stoop of her building waiting for her. Though she wore holographic armor, I watched her approach through the infrared sunglasses I wore. I recall the sun shone brightly and the air was warm for November. I'd actually been planning on ambushing her partner Daniel, who I assumed would be with her. I had some hired muscle waiting inside the office. There wasn't supposed to be any bloodshed--except maybe Daniel's--but that was because I'd foolishly thought he'd been the brains of their partnership. Turns out I'd set up the wrong guy... or gal, in this instance. A fatal case of sexism.

I wince at the memory of the sound of the gun going off, though I can't remember actively pulling the trigger. She'd thrown something at me--a helmet maybe? My finger squeezed automatically. The recoil nearly made me hit myself in the face. I can still see the rain of plaster dust covering her blonde curls and settling against her cheeks like a kind of anti-rouge.

But the second time, the time she's so convinced I would have killed her... had I really done it? She'd said something crazy, some kind of threat to my masculinity, trying to make me do it, but even then....

Even then I knew I loved her.

My finger wouldn't do it. I remember trying to convince myself that I had to. I'd shut my eyes, trying to will myself to do it, and the next thing I knew Morningstar was between us, his hand on the gun. I never heard him come in. That had baffled me until I learned, years later, that he was an angel of sorts, the devil to be exact.

And I'd left without a fight. Sure, he'd taken the gun from me, but there were things I could have done. Still, I could see Dee's point. The gun had gone off. I'd intended her harm. No wonder she hates me.

"Oh," I say quietly. "Right."

"So excuse me for not feeling warmly disposed towards you at the moment."

We stare at each other--me, with my mouth hanging open, wishing I had something funny or clever to say, and her, with her face blotched red with barely contained anger.

Looking into her cold blue eyes, I know. I know there's no way I'm going to get past our history, at least not right now. I'm going to have to do something serious to earn Dee's trust. So, I pull myself together, peel my back off the wall, and say, "I'm going in."

She blinks, as if suddenly remembering why we came here. "The rave," she says with a nod. "Yeah, that would be a good idea."

"Yeah." As would throwing myself off a cliff, or anything that would stop me from making any more social faux pas.

I never did get to tell her about Frank or ask after the Medusa.

Fuck.