

Chapter 22: Mouse

I stumble into the kitchen, clearly interrupting something. Luis and Ariel jump away from each other guiltily and attempt to lean casually against the countertops. Deidre stops talking mid-sentence, and pretends a sudden interest in the sugar container even though I know she takes her coffee black.

"Uh, just came for a refill," I say holding out my empty plate as if for evidence. They all stare at me, so I jerk my thumb in the direction of the living room. "Plus, there's a little father daughter bonding going on in there."

"Oh, good," Ariel says, with a relieved sigh. "About time."

Dee says nothing, just continues to stir the sugar in the crystal bowl. I fill up on a bit more potatoes and another slice of cantaloupe. I can feel everyone's eyes on me, so I feel the need to make inane conversation. "Good fruit. Greenhouse?"

"Yes," Luis says. "Theo has one on his roof. Grows fruits and veggies all year round."

"Nice," I remark, quickly running out of things to say. I sit down in the chair near the door, and chew my fruit.

"Mouse knows about Maxine," Deidre says, suddenly. "He's on the Inquisition's payroll, but came clean to me."

Cantaloupe shoots across the room and spatters against white cupboard draws under the sink. I'm still coughing, as Dee continues, "We can talk in front of him."

"Are you sure he's loyal?" Luis glares at me suspiciously, but offers me a wetted napkin, anyway.

I wiped my face gratefully.

"He doesn't like the cops any more than we do," Dee says.

"Aren't you worried they'll threaten prison and he'll break?" Ariel asks.

"I am in the room, you know," I say, handing the napkin back to Luis who rinses it off and discreetly leans down to clean up the cantaloupe pulp on the cabinet.

"Okay then," Dee says, capturing my gaze with her china blues. "Are you good for it?"

"I wouldn't trust me, particularly," I say. "If you need to talk secret Medusa shit, I'd just as happily go stand outside."

"It's snowing." Luis says as if that's some kind of deterrent.

"I can wear my suit." I stand up and look for an alternate exit.

"Sit down and eat your breakfast," Dee commands.

Folding my hands neatly on my lap, I sit. Ariel stares at me. I stare back. Luis and Ariel look at each other, then back at me. Deidre sips her coffee. I twiddle my thumbs. "Okay," I say, "I have a question for you. Where is she? I mean, how are you hiding a woman who must be in her eighties?"

Dee surprises me by answering cheerfully: "Nanotech."

It's early morning and my brain feels like sawdust, but I swear Dee just said, "nanotech," like that explains everything. Luis and Ariel grin stupidly at me, as if we're all in on some kind of super-cool secret. "Forgive me if I'm being dense, but what did you just say?"

"Nanotech. The LINK, mouse.net -- we made her invisible to anyone with a connection."

I have to get up and pour myself a cup of coffee in order to think about that one. I find the biggest mug Luis has set out and fill it to the brim. I lean against the wall next to the coffeemaker and take a gulp. I grimace. It still tastes like hot sludge to me. I don't know how anyone can drink the stuff, but I force another swallow down.

"Okay," I say out loud, because, honestly, before noon, I have trouble thinking quietly. "It's some kind of LINK-suggestion, like the LINK-angels, only instead of making people hallucinate they see something, you make them think they don't."

Dee touches the side of her nose. "Got it in one."

I have to admit I'm profoundly impressed. I slug back another hit of the disgusting black stuff, and say, "that must be a seriously complex trick. I mean, at the commune--and out on the streets--people are registering visual images at different rates, with different systems running. Whoever wrote that script is a certified genius."

I blink, and there's a woman standing by the sink next to Luis. She's got steel gray hair cut into a precise bob. Dressed in a loose fitting tank top, a royal blue, batik skirt, chunky bits of ceramic jewelry, and sandals she looks like an earth mother from some ancient history book.

In fact, she has just stepped out of history.

It only takes a second for my brain to register her infamous face. It's Maxine Mann, the Medusa.

"Thank you," she smiles sweetly.

"Allah protect me," I say, as I make the sign against the evil eye.