

Chapter 26: Mouse

Everyone smiles and laughs, like the world's most renown mass murderer isn't standing in the kitchen, elbows leaning against the sink. I don't even hear what they're saying, but I nod like I'm paying attention. My stomach does flips, while I wait for mouse.net to find Frank's LINK connection.

Seconds crawl. Just as it pings, I notice everyone in the room is staring at me. I glance nervously from face to face. "What?"

"What do you think, Mouse?" Dee asks.

"I'm not sure," I say, deciding to come clean. "What were we talking about?"

"The virus," Dee says, as if that one word was enough of a clue for me to pick up the entire thread of the conversation. When I stare blankly, she adds, "Do you think you can program it?"

"I haven't had enough coffee. Maybe you better explain it again," I say hurriedly, especially since a badge has appeared in my field of vision.

Dee's eyes flick suspiciously over me. My heart flutters, and I almost jump out of my skin when Frank's voice sounds in my inner ear: "What's going on? Who is this?"

"Hello," I say for Frank's benefit, but I put a bit of a sarcastic tone in it so I can add to Dee, "I'm waiting."

"Mouse? Is that you?"

I lift the coffee cup up to my lips, and mutter as softly as I can, "Yes."

When the federal prison system nuked my LINK, I lost the ability to subvocalize. The LINK is hardware and software; mouse.net is a barebones operating system that I originally designed to work on external systems like videophones or VR suits. The idea was to deencrypt the LINK's biological components--to make them non-proprietary, if you will--so a person could gain access to the LINK without having to have all the nano-built cybernetic interface. The majority of people who use mouse.net are completely without bioware.

However, lots of people, including myself, run mouse.net through LINK technology. It's like when the old-timers used to buy their computers from major companies, and add on freeware. When Morningstar worked his mojo on me, he awoke only certain components of my internal system. Inside my head is just enough functioning biotech to run mouse.net, but not the whole LINK.

Normally, I consider this a minor inconvenience.

"Why is there no image? Is this a LINK signal?" Frank's badge image asks, "Are you there? Speak to me."

"Are you talking to someone, Mouse?" Dee asks, her eyes watching my face intently.

"Yes," I say. "You."

"Me, what?" Frank yells. Unfortunately, he can only hear my side of the conversation, "Is this some kind of a prank, Mouse, because it's not funny."

Don't I know it. Dee, meanwhile, points to her head. Her fingers are bent in the shape of a gun.

"If you've got the cops on the line, boy, you're dead," she says.

That shocks me, I nearly choke on the awful coffee. "Dead? You mean, seriously dead?"

"Who's dead?" Frank wants to know.

"What other kind of dead is there?" Dee asks. I look into her eyes, trying to decide if she would do it. Her face is impassive, cold. She looks determined, but I still can't believe she's being serious. I glance around the kitchen. Ariel and Luis watch me grimly. Maxine, I notice, has gone ghost again. I can't tell if she's still in the room or not, they put the blinders back on me. I have nothing to give Frank, I realize. With Maxine doing her LINK-disappearing act, they wouldn't be able to see her to arrest her anyway.

I disconnect. Frank's badge fades.

"You would really kill me?" I want the answer. I mean, last night Dee was laughing at my jokes, holding my hand, and telling me how much I surprised her. Now it's death threats.

"Are there other bodies buried? Have you become a murderer, Dee?"

Deidre looks away, studying the depths of her coffee cup. "You would be the first," she says slowly. "But, I would do what was necessary to make sure this project was safe."

"This project?"

"You really were just spaced out during our conversation," she says with a tiny hint of a smile. "You're not a morning person at all, are you?"

"Look," I admitted. "Seeing Mann was kind of distracting for me, okay?"

"She's gone now—out the back door," Luis says, turning around to rinse a few plates in the sink. "So if you did call the cops the only thing they'd nab is a couple of queers and Jezebel over there."

"I thought the cops were already here," I say, jerking my thumb in the direction of the living room. "Isn't that Michael guy a cop?"

"They've been awfully quiet," Ariel says suddenly. "Maybe I should check on them."

We all watch Ariel totter off. My eggs are cold and slimy, but I gulp a few forkfuls down anyway. Dee sips her coffee, still eyeing me. Luis hums to himself while loading up the dishwasher.

"So does Maxine live here or something?" I ask, gulping down more rubbery eggs.

"Sometimes," Luis says over his shoulder. "There are a bunch of us here in Harlem that put her up from time to time."

"They've been working on a cure, Mouse," Dee says.

"For what?"

"The Medusa."

I let that sink in for a moment, but my brain can't really register the magnitude of the implications. "Cure the Medusa," I repeat. "It's that possible?"

Luis turns around, his face bright. "Actually, yes. As you know the Medusa bomb is a combination of nanotechnology and biowarfare. The main force behind the bomb were viral nanobots whose programmed task was to consume complex molecules and excrete silicon. That was supposed to be the end of it, but, like any good virus, the Medusa mutated and became resistant to its internal command to stop. So, we're just scripting another set of 'bots. These ones stop the rogue virus. Then another set eats the glass and..."

“Wait,” I say, holding up my hand. “Are you telling me that you’re going to let Maxine Mann unleash, not one, but two new nano-viruses?”

Luis looks at Dee and then at me with a confused look on his face. “Of course.”

“Of course?” My mouth is dry. “And you’re willing to kill people over this?” I ask Dee, who gives me a similar wide-eyed look. “Merciful Allah, are you people completely insane? I wouldn’t trust Mann to reprogram a biosequencer. She fucked up the Medusa in the first place.”

“She’s being very careful,” Luis insists. “We’re all checking her work.”

“Oh, well, THAT makes me feel so much better,” I say.

“Be reasonable, Mouse,” Dee says, leaning her elbows on the narrow wooden table. “Harlem has the best scientists in the world.”

“Best amateur scientists,” I correct. “Not one of these people has a degree from an accredited college.”

“That’s because science is banned in most universities,” Luis says sharply.

“Exactly my point,” I say. “Dabblers and armchair nanoscientists are ‘checking the work’ of the world’s biggest screw up.”

“Before the Medusa, Maxine won the Noble Prize,” Luis huffs.

“Great, so she’s fuck-up with friends. I’m still not impressed.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re impressed or not, Mouse,” Dee says. “It’s already finished and tested.”

I start to feel sick. Eggs threaten to rise in my throat, and I push my plate away.

“Where do you think Perseus came from?” Dee asks.

Perseus is a Gorgon that has out-lived all of his kin. He believes his people are a step up in the evolutionary chain, and that Gorgonism actually advances mental capacities beyond known genius levels. He also thinks normal people ought to be infected with the virus; he’s a total fruitcake.

“Please tell me you have nothing to do with that guy,” I beg.

“He was an early experiment of Mann’s,” Luis says. “Not exactly a success, but we learned a lot.”

“We,” I repeat with horror.

“It works, Mouse,” Dee insists. “There have been no side effects so far.”

“So far. How long until these viruses mutate?”

“They don’t live long enough to mutate,” Luis says.

“Isn’t that exactly what Mann promised about the Medusa virus?”

The sound of splitting wood shattering glass comes from the living room. Dee leaps to her feet.

“Goddamn you, Mouse.”