

Chapter 127 - Curiosity

I was caught completely off-guard by Mouse's sudden surge of enthusiasm, and honestly a bit unnerved by the intensity of it.

His eyes practically sparkled with the same kind of crazy fascination Kill Joy's had shown—although Kill Joy's had been far, far more subtle in comparison—, leaving me wondering if this was just some kind of runner-specific quirk I'd have to get used to from now on.

"Ehh... *Show you?*" I asked hesitantly, desperately hoping Cryo would jump in and save my ass here.

Mouse practically lunged forward, nearly sprawling himself across the table, those unnaturally long mechanical fingers grasping at the air inches from my face.

"Yes, yes! Hit me with it—I wanna *feel* it!"

I shot a pleading glance toward Cryo, hoping he'd step in before Mouse decided to vault straight over the table. Instead, he just rubbed a weary hand over his face, shaking his head lightly like a disappointed parent watching their kid cause a scene in public.

"Now ya've done it..." he muttered with a sigh before finally turning to me directly. "Mouse here's got a bit of a thing when it comes to quick-hacks, see? So mentionin' ya got yer own homebrew one... Well, ya pretty much doomed yerself. He ain't gonna drop it 'til ya give 'im what he wants. Best just get it outta the way, honestly. Brought ya here to have 'im look ya over anyway, so guess it's two birds, stones and all that, ya get the idea."

He waved vaguely between Mouse and myself, as if to hurry me along, but that wasn't helpful in the slightest.

'Cryo, what the actual fuck? I can't just throw [Venombite] at this guy!' Panic started bubbling up in the back of my head as I took another look at Mouse. He was practically jittering in place now, his eagerness bordering on the downright feral. *'With all those Cybernetics, [Venombite]'s gonna rip right through him...!'*

I had designed the quick-hack *specifically* to punch above my weight class, taking down full-blown 'Borgs in one nasty, very resource-intensive blast.

While I hadn't written the [Spike] segment of the quick-hack myself—the whole thing had been more or less shamelessly yanked from Kill Joy's example shard—it still hit like an absolute freight train.

[Spike] itself was already built to do one thing, and one thing only: Obliterate electronic systems. Drop it on a drone or a bot, and if their ICE didn't catch it in time? That was it.

Systems fried. Circuits scorched. Power flow torched into static.

Or otherwise known as: Dead drone or bot.

And with the stealth layers I'd woven into [Venombite]—courtesy of [Spiritus Machina]—those ICE defenses? They were far less likely to be able to hold back the juicy parts that Kill Joy's [Spike] provided.

Sure, I had ended up having to do some alterations to the [Spike] section that had neutered some of its damage potential, but I was fairly certain that it would still be able to do its job as advertised—especially with the amount of resources I had allocated to [Venombite] on my deck.

Which made Mouse a fucking problem.

Because he wasn't a drone. He wasn't a bot. And sure as hell, he wasn't a 600kg+ cyberpsycho-grade 'Borg built to soak system overloads and keep swinging.

He was literally just a guy—albeit one held together with scavenged chrome and faith in questionable soldering work.

There was no universe in which his body could shrug off what I'd built [Venombite] to do.

It wasn't a "test it and reboot" kind of situation.

It was a "congratulations, you've just bricked half your nervous system" kind of outcome—in the best of cases. Without knowing what kind of other cybernetics he had chipped all across his body, and especially *internally*, the worst-case scenario was straight up fiery, really painful, death.

He wasn't my target audience whatsoever.

That had been the meat-tanks—the industrial-grade cyber psychos, the chrome-sleeved nightmares that could tank a hit from a railgun and ask for seconds. Not... *Mouse*.

"Listen, I really don't think this is a good idea..." I started cautiously, trying to appeal to whatever shred of common sense Mouse might've had left.

But the guy had already leaned even further across the table, chanting, "Hit me, hit me, *hit me!*" like some deranged quick-hack cultist ready to sacrifice himself for the glory of cybernetic suffering.

I snapped my gaze toward Cryo and Pina, desperation rising in my chest. "Seriously, guys, this might actually fucking *kill* him. Little help here?!"

Pina raised a single skeptical eyebrow, arms crossed in front of her with a "not my problem" look clearly plastered on her face. Cryo, meanwhile, just sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose like this wasn't the first time he'd had this exact conversation.

"Don't think that matters much to him, girl," he admitted with a resigned shake of his head.

"Sayin' Mouse is obsessed is probably understatin' it a bit. Haa... Tell ya what: Whatever happens, happens. If yer quick-hack fries his ass and zero's him out, we won't hold a grudge."

I just stared at Cryo, completely stunned into silence.

What the fuck did he *mean* they “wouldn’t hold a grudge”?

We were literally discussing the possibility of killing their own crew member!

My pulse raced, and I only realised that panic had started flooding through my veins when the passive effects of my Ego kicked in and forcibly reeled my emotions back enough to let rational thought take hold again.

“Can I get that in writing?” I finally asked, dead serious.

Cryo chuckled, clearly thinking I was joking—until my expression didn’t budge even a millimeter.

Finally getting the hint, he shrugged with an amused smirk and promptly shot me a quick face-to-face message.

[“If Mouse dies as a result of yer Quick-Hack, we won’t hold a grudge.” – Cryo]

Honestly, the ease with which he’d given me written proof was unsettling, like handing me a free murder-pass without a second thought.

‘This is absolutely fucking insane...’ echoed inside my head.

Still, at this point, backing out didn’t seem like an option without throwing the entire meeting; if Mouse even let me leave the booth without showing off the Quick-Hack to begin with, which was honestly very questionable at this stage.

I discreetly prepared an emergency message for Vega—[“Help me *NOW*. Cryo betrayed me!”]—ready to fire it off at a moment’s notice if things went completely sideways.

A written permission slip was only worth something if you could actually live long enough to make your case; if Cryo or Pina simply blasted my brains across the booth for killing Mouse accidentally, their “permission” wouldn’t mean jackshit.

Now turning back to Mouse, I noticed he’d retreated slightly to his seat, which I was very thankful for, but was practically *vibrating* in place, jittering with excitement and anticipation.

He looked like a kid waiting for presents on Christmas morning—if those presents happened to involve potentially catastrophic neurological damage or outright death.

“Fine,” I conceded, holding up a hand. “But if things go south, don’t blame me.”

Mouse nodded so rapidly I was half-worried he might snap his own neck.

I carefully pulled my deck from the secure compartment in my backpack, immediately noticing how everyone in the booth tensed up, eyes locked onto it like I’d just pulled out a primed grenade—which, technically, I had. Ignoring them, I fiddled briefly with the activation settings, trying to buy myself just a little more time to steady my nerves.

“So... the quick-hack’s called [Venombite], and it works by—”

“STOP!” Mouse interrupted loudly, so sudden and sharp I nearly dropped my deck onto the table in surprise.

“No spoilers! No spoilers! I wanna go in blind! Don’t tell me anything—just hit me with it! My ICE hasn’t had a good fight in ages, girl, so c’mon and HIT ME!” The words spilled out of him in a torrent, feverish and manic, with a twisted eagerness that sent another cold shiver down my spine.

I pulled up the stored Quick-Hack subroutines on my deck—four in total now: The trio I’d snagged from Kill Joy, and my own handiwork, [Venombite].

My thumb hovered over the confirm input, second-guessing for just a second. *‘I could throttle the resources—cut the HEAT and RAM usage, play it safe...’*

But the thought vanished as quickly as it came.

‘Nah. That’d just make me look like a fraud. If the Quick-Hack fizzles or underperforms, Mouse’ll spot it instantly. Especially with how tweaked his gear is—he’d see the system trace, see what the Quick-Hack was trying to do but fail due to lacking resources, and clock it for what it is: Me going easy. That would probably piss him off more than anything else...’

No, it had to be the real version. Full power.

The same config I’d used in the Kill Joy test—anything less would just sabotage myself.

“Alright then... Remember what you said,” I warned, glancing sideways at Cryo.

He gave me an utterly unbothered nod, leaning back like he was about to watch a street show, legs casually crossed, one arm thrown over the backrest. No help there.

‘Well... here goes nothing. Please don’t die...’

I tapped the final confirmation, and the deck flickered to life with a muted glow.

[Venombite]

And then—just like before with Kill Joy—nothing.

No obvious effect, no flashy visual. Not even a flicker of feedback from Mouse.

But I knew the Quick-Hack was already digging in, slipping past the outer shell, snaking through ports and pathways. My deck started to heat in my lap, warmer than usual—always a sign that the deeper layers of the stealth routines were working overtime.

Then came Mouse’s reaction.

“Aww, that’s it...?” he said, voice full of crushed expectations. “Guess it got caught by my ICE...”

He let out a sigh like a kid denied candy, slumping back with a pout that didn't match his age—or his amount of cybernetics.

"Still, good try, I guess..." he added, trying to save face as he rubbed his neck.

Then, muttering mostly to himself, "Shouldn't have gotten my hopes up for a random corpo girl Cryo dragged in, damnit... How does this always happen to me..." He slumped even further into his seat, thoroughly deflated.

In a way, Mouse wasn't wrong.

His ICE *had* caught [Venombite]—or at least enough of it to make a serious dent.

I glanced down at the status screen on my deck, eyebrows creeping up as I read the result.

[Venombite deployment success. ICE sheer: 76%]

Only about 24% of the Quick-Hack had actually slipped through. That was a massive drop from what had made it through Kill Joy's digital avatar.

*'Although... Kill Joy hadn't exactly **tried** to stop it,' I reminded myself. 'He basically bent over and invited it in. Mouse, on the other hand, wants to give his ICE a workout. Makes sense that there's such a discrepancy then, I guess...'*

Still, with only a quarter of [Venombite] punching through, I wasn't shocked it hadn't kicked in yet. Most of the self-repair and propagation subroutines were probably scrambling to reconstitute what was left—definitely a few more seconds of delay.

Assuming it even could.

I hadn't exactly limit-tested the Quick-Hack to this degree and I had only managed to have it be able to recover from around 20% total remaining—but even *that* was under perfect DDE conditions.

Cryo and Pina, though? Totally unaware of the very tense math going on in my brain.

They exchanged a glance, and Cryo shrugged, already halfway through defending my apparent failure. "Well, I mean... Mouse's our runner for a reason, eh? Can't exactly expect a newbie to—"

WHAM.

Mouse had suddenly slammed the back of his skull into the booth wall, cutting Cryo off mid-thought. His eyes went wide, a garbled groan bubbling from his throat.

"Arrrrhhhh!" he choked out, body stiffening like he'd just stuck a fork in an outlet.

His entire body spasmed violently, limbs jerking and rattling like a malfunctioning puppet.

Mouse's cybernetic eyes lit up, flashing chaotically, beams of harsh, white light stabbing out into the booth, briefly illuminating our shocked faces.

He clawed desperately at the table, mechanical fingers grinding into the surface with a horrible screech, splintering the synthetic wood beneath.

A sharp, sizzling pop echoed out from one of his implants, accompanied by the unmistakable smell of overheated circuits and burning flesh. Blue sparks suddenly danced between his fingers as the capacitors in his hands discharged their load uncontrollably into the metal surrounding them, sending jolts through his wrists and forearms.

His head snapped sideways, his jaw locking open as another violent burst of electrical crackling fired somewhere deep within his skull.

The cables running down from the cybernetics in his head twitched erratically, looking almost alive as pulses surged uncontrollably down his spine.

"F-f-aaa—!" Mouse tried to stammer out, voice distorted by bursts of static as his systems fought desperately—and utterly failed—to stabilize against [Venombite]'s cascading assaults.

All of this happened so rapidly, in such quick succession, that the three of us were left simply frozen in shock.

Cryo's easy-going demeanor had vanished instantly when Mouse's head had hit the wall, replaced by a wide-eyed alarm. Pina had similarly jolted backward in her seat, her arms half-raised as if preparing to physically restrain him, but unsure of whether to go for it or not.

And me? I just sat there, frozen, watching in stunned horror as Mouse's body jerked and convulsed under the weight of the digital chaos I'd just set loose inside him.

Yeah, I'd built it exactly for this purpose.

I knew *precisely* what [Venombite] was designed to do. But seeing it hit someone—really hit—right in front of me, live and unfiltered? That was something else entirely.

Kill Joy's words rang in my skull, clearer now than ever: "*Ohohoh, now that's **nasty**, girl. Really, really nasty.*"

Back then, I'd assumed he meant the stealth layers. The sneaky little propagation tricks I'd woven in, the obfuscation protocols, the ICE-dodging finesse.

But no—he'd meant the whole damn package, I now realized.

His [Spike], brutal and uncompromising.

My [Spiritus Machina]-amplified cloakwork, slipping the hack in like a needle through flesh.

The combination didn't just bypass defenses once—the moment it was inside and fully ready to go, it overwhelmed them from the inside-out, gave them no room to breathe or recover.

That's what Kill Joy had seen.

And now, I was watching it unravel someone in real-time.

As if on cue, Mouse's whole body convulsed again, a violent jolt that made his boots slam against the underside of the table hard enough to rattle the whole damn booth.

His hands—those wiry, mismatched cybernetic claws—twitched and spasmed out of control as he reached for his own scalp like he was trying to soothe a headache, ending up with them scraping long gouges into the metallic surface of his implants.

Then came the *smell*.

First was the sharp, acrid stench of melting insulation—hot plastic and scorched circuits—as internal wiring cooked itself alive under the Quick-Hack's relentless assault.

Then came the meatier scent: Burnt flesh.

Somewhere, something organic had fused with metal and clearly lost the fight, and the booth was suddenly filled with the unmistakable stink of the same exact odour that cybernetic burnout was so well known for.

His eyes that had lit up like spotlights earlier—pure beams of LED-white blasting out from his sockets as the optics surged, had overclocked well past their design limits and abruptly turned off with two electric *pops*.

And then, just as fast as it started, it ended: With a jerking shudder, Mouse slumped forward.

His upper body collapsed onto the table with a heavy *thunk*, arms frozen mid-twitch, faint wisps of smoke curling from the ports at his neck, his fingers partially dug into his own skull implants, and the exposed seams running up into his scalp smoking.

One of the cable-lines feeding from the back of his neck twitched once, gave one final, short electrical *pop*, then also fell limp.

The booth went completely silent.

The only sound was the faint hum of the air filter trying—and failing—to clear the thick chemical stink now clinging to everything.

Cryo had frozen mid-sip, beer hovering an inch from his lips.

Pina looked like she couldn't decide if she was about to yell, laugh, or vomit—or maybe all three.

And me? I just sat there, staring at the smoking heap that used to be Mouse, with my brain half-blank and the rest screaming, '*What the fuck did I just do?!*'

The other half of me, however, had been aware enough of the situation to drop the deck into my backpack's secure compartment again and was poised to kick down the booth's door and run for it, my hands clasp the straps of the backpack like I was in the middle of a car crash.

It took a few long, dragging seconds before anyone moved or did anything.

The air still buzzed with leftover static, and Mouse—if he could even still be called that—was lying motionless, the occasional spark jumping from his left hand like a busted socket trying to reboot something that wasn't there anymore.

Then, from across the table, Pina suddenly let out a single, surprised laugh.

Not hysterical. Not panicked. Just a dry, disbelieving *"Heh."*

She blinked, glanced at Mouse's still-smoking body, then looked at me with this weird mix of respect and utter disbelief.

Cryo was next.

He finally lowered his glass, set it down with a soft clink, and leaned back against the cushioned wall like he was watching a show wrap up its final act.

"Huh... Well... Would ya look at that," he muttered, tone casual as hell. Like he hadn't just witnessed one of his crew get flash-fried from the inside out.

The casualness of it all hit me sideways. *Hard.*

For a second, I genuinely questioned what the hell I was doing chasing a vouch from someone like him. Someone who could watch a teammate convulse, smoke, and drop like a corpse, and react like he'd just seen an unexpected weather change.

But then again... This was the Operator life.

You didn't sign up for friendships. Not real ones.

If you got lucky, maybe you found people you worked well with; People you didn't mind dying next to.

But "friends"? Those were rare. Downright mythical.

Most people in the business were just passing ghosts—colleagues at best, names on a list more often than not. Even if you liked each other, that didn't mean you'd stop to mourn when one of those names got crossed out.

You'd toast their name once, maybe twice, then move on. That was the reality.

Still, I kept sneaking glances at Mouse, my body coiled tighter than a tripwire.

I wasn't entirely convinced Cryo and Pina weren't about to flip moods on a dime.

This all felt too... *smooth.*

"Definitely a nasty piece o' work ya got there, girl," Cryo finally said, lifting his beer in a casual toast. That small motion—one hand occupied, the other resting—was enough to let me breathe again, just a little. No way he was about to jump across the table mid-sip, right?

“Didn’t actually think ya’d be able to do anythin’ to ol’ Mouse, but... well. Guess we all learned somethin’ today, eh?”

Pina raised her glass too, grinning wide. “Hell fuckin’ yeah. That was sick! Smell’s awful, but Mouse never exactly smelled great to begin with, so honestly? Might be an upgrade.”

She tilted her head at me, still smirking. “And hey, nice to finally have another girl in the crew. I’m down.”

I was still trying to figure out what the hell kind of group I’d just been drafted into, but the vibe was clear enough—I was in. Venombite had kicked the door open for me.

But one glaring detail stuck out like a flashing neon sign.

“Ehh... What exactly is the task, anyway? And what’s the pay look like?” I asked, trying to sound casual and definitely missing the mark.

Cryo blinked, like he’d just remembered his own name. “Oh shit, yeah. Didn’t even tell ya. My bad.” He set his glass down and leaned in a bit. “We’re smokin’ out a small scav den. Nothing major, just some squatters with stolen cybernetics makin’ trouble in the wrong part of the city.”

He glanced at Pina, who shrugged like it was the most mundane thing in the world.

“Pay’s the usual equal split,” he continued. “Quarter each, clean cut. Mouse had the deets stashed on one of his shards, so we’ll need to get that from him later. But the gist is simple: Go in, clear ‘em out, get paid. Three steps. Nice and tidy. How we clear ‘em out’s up to us, but if ya ask me?”

He tapped the side of his glass. “We make sure they don’t come back. Leaves the clients a lot happier that way.”

I nodded, trying to keep my face neutral while my brain full-on spiraled as I looked at Mouse again.

‘Cool cool cool. That all sounds very straightforward. Just one small issue... How the fuck am I supposed to pull data off a fried shard...? With “we’ll need to get that from him later” he definitely meant me, didn’t he? I might’ve said I was a runner, but nobody told me that included necromantic shard-diving into recently-fried teammates, damnit! What the fuck do I even look for...?!’