

Ladia pointed to the holograph, an image she'd created of Juliet that was uncannily realistic. Juliet's doppelganger was clothed in tight blue shorts and a sports bra, and all of her cybernetics were highlighted in soft shades of pink that glowed under the model's skin, from her entire right arm to her eyes to the tiny chips in her ears and sinuses. At the moment, Ladia was pointing to the cylindrical implant in Juliet's abdomen, not the cooling mechanism for the blood going through her brain, but the medical nanite suite that hugged her abdominal aorta. "I didn't quite realize what a nice upgrade this was! I did a little digging while you were in the restroom, and this model number is a few iterations beyond the last one Cybergen sold commercially."

"Really?" Juliet's mind began to race, trying to think of a way to bolster up the story she'd spun about finding a wartime collector's son liquidating his private stash on Callisto.

"Yes! You really lucked out; that collector of yours must have picked this up at one of the secure storage facilities where Cybergen kept upcoming models and prototypes. I've heard of things like this out in the wild but never seen one in person."

"Wow! I don't think I quite realized . . ."

"Of course, this will make anything we do a lot easier. It's like being hooked to a blood infuser twenty-four seven."

"I was on an infusion machine for a while back on Earth. I had a job that required me to heal faster, and it really helped. You're saying my new nanites are at that level?"

"Oh yes. More so. These are some of the smartest, most capable little bugs I've ever analyzed. You've got rapid healing, toxin removal, anti-biotic and anti-viral batteries, nutrient filtering and delivery, rapid oxygenation . . . Gosh! I could go on for another ten minutes. It's quite a medical suite. Anyway, the reason I wanted to examine it was because I have a new product that might meet your needs. The only issue is that it's nanite-based, and the nanites require a capable management suite; your Cybergen medical package here is more than up to the job." She poked the hologram with the tip of her pen, illustrating the device in question.

"Meet my needs? You mean the subdermal armor?"

"Right! This is a much less invasive solution than the carbon-weave product you mentioned. It works exceptionally well, too; I'll show you some vids of people with the product surviving ten-story falls with only bumps and bruises."

"What about bullets?"

Ladia lifted her eyebrows. "Oh! Right to the point, I see. Well, this new product was designed for military applications and has been proven to protect the end user from small-arms fire. Let me show you how it works." Ladia tapped a few icons on her tablet, and then Juliet's holographic image began slowly rotating as a swarm of tiny yellow dots, likely meant to represent nanites, propagated through it, starting at her arm and flowing through a now-visible vascular system. As the dots spread, the veins and arteries faded, and then the model's bones became visible, and the dots flowed into them, settling there, motionless, covering the entire skeletal surface.

"So, we introduce the nanites through an injection, and they are programmed to bond with specific cells in your skeletal structure, ensuring total coverage. They integrate deeply with your

bones, almost like weaving extra-strong fibers into them. The process won't change how your bones work; they'll still produce blood cells and store minerals, but they'll be much stronger."

"So, how's this different from the example I gave you? When my friend got shot in the chest, her bones were basically metallic . . ."

"These nanites are smart—they know when to work and when to rest, letting your bones be bones. Under normal conditions, they just hang out, waiting and watching. As soon as your bones experience localized stress, they react faster than thought, providing extra protection that makes them very hard to break or . . . penetrate."

"Fewer complications?"

"Oh yes. I'm sure your friend doesn't have that carbon weave on all her bones; it changes the structure and reduces their biological function. The product I'm showing you here is a cutting-edge blend of biology and technology. The nanites are biocompatible; we'll create them by incorporating your own stem cells into their design. Your bones won't even know they're there."

"I don't get how they can possibly react as fast as a bullet hitting me."

"That's because you think in terms of human reactions. We have a lot of baggage up here," Ladia tapped her head, "that can slow us down. These things are simple—they detect stress, they react with an electrical signal to the surrounding nanites, and, essentially instantaneously, they form a hardened bond. I know bullets are fast, but this response is faster."

"Well, shoot, Doc," Juliet picked up her glass of smooth, obviously very expensive red wine and took a sip. Swallowing, she continued, "sign me up."

"Excellent! There's the matter of cost, and we'll need to custom prepare the nanites for your body, but it's a simple outpatient procedure. Once I have it ready, I'll just give you the injection and send you on your way. According to the sales rep, the nanites settle into place within twenty-four hours."

"You haven't used them before?"

"No." Ladia frowned and poured Juliet more wine. "You see, that brings me back to the matter of the cost. It can be rather prohibitive. The reason you don't see every banger, mercenary, or corpo-sec agent running around with bullet-proof bones is that these nanites only come from one company, Swedish Biologic, and they're not cheap . . ."

"Oh, brother. Just hit me with it, Doctor Ladia."

"Half a million Sol-bits."

"Five hundred k?" Juliet's mouth fell open. "That's more than top-end medical suites!"

"While a medical suite will repair damage, this system prevents it. Can you put a price on knowing you can survive getting run over by a truck? That a bullet to the brain won't spell certain doom? Forgive my colorful language; this is the sort of thing the sales rep said to me when I balked at the price. I didn't think I had any clients who'd be willing to pay that much, but then he started quoting lines like that. I suppose I can see the value. The question is, do you?"

Juliet thought about the doctor's pitch and had to admit she had a point. Five hundred thousand bits, though, was a big chunk of her savings. For that kind of money, even if she didn't already have the parts stored away on the *Wing*, she could replace all her limbs and probably buy a dozen different brands of subdermal armor for her head and chest. Was it worth it to have this newer, non-invasive tech? It would undoubtedly cool her desire to spend more money anytime soon. "Before I decide, Doc, talk to me about my arm and Cybergen reflex job. I know my arm's good, but does it hold up to Cybergen tech? Is it still as fast as the rest of me? Is it faster? I haven't had to activate my reflex job since I got it done, and I'm wondering if, in my line of work, I'm fast enough."

"Really? Well, let's do an assessment; the wine won't help, but your nanites can sober you up. Come on, I have a sensor array that can measure your response times." Ladia stood up and walked toward a door that led further into her clinic. As the door *snicked* open, she turned and winked at Juliet, "By the way, don't forget we still need to talk about a weapon implant in that left arm of yours."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten. It's just the money I'm worried about."

Ladia chuckled and led the way down a short hallway to a surgical suite with only one plastic-covered auto-surgeon. Beside it was an enclosed chamber that reminded Juliet of an airlock. "If you step in there, I can start a simulation that will tie into your AUI. It will give you a series of diagnostics to test your baseline reaction speed, and then we can run it again with your speed augment active. We'll be able to see how your BioFusion arm stacks up against the Cybergen nerve and muscle augments."

"All right," Juliet stepped toward the door, but Ladia stopped her.

"Just a minute. You should wear something comfortable and leave your sidearm out here." The request was simple and innocent-seeming, but for some reason, it triggered a slight feeling of panic in Juliet. She turned to glare at Ladia, and the woman visibly flinched. Juliet sighed and shook her head; she'd already listened to Ladia's thoughts earlier and reassured herself that the doctor hadn't been compromised. All she'd picked up were Ladia's usual complimentary thoughts about Juliet's appearance and her relief that she'd returned to Luna; she genuinely seemed to like her and more than just as a high-paying client.

"Is something wrong, Juliet?" Angel asked.

"No," Juliet subvocalized. "I'm just being a little paranoid. Probably some long-buried PTSD from Murphy. You don't see anything weird, do you? We're not being jammed or anything?"

"No . . ."

"Sorry, Doc. I have trust issues. I'll bring my gun with me, but I'll set it on the ground inside the door so it won't interfere."

"That's fine, but you should also remove your boots and jacket. I could find some shorts or something so you don't have to move about in those jeans . . ."

"They're stretchy. I'm good. Don't worry." Juliet shrugged out of her jacket, dropping it on a stainless-steel cart next to the door, then bent and unlaced her boots. A couple of minutes later,

she stepped through the door into the strange little room and placed her gun belt on the floor beside the door. Standing in her socks, jeans, and t-shirt, she turned and gave Ladia a thumbs-up through the window. The doctor nodded and gestured in the air, and then Juliet's AUI lit up with visual artifacts. She assumed Angel let the code through—she usually filtered any sort of invasive advertisement or interactive AUI elements projected by businesses or municipalities.

A grid of red, glowing balls had appeared in the air in front of her. There were sixteen of them in four rows and four columns, and they rotated slowly, almost mesmerizingly. As Juliet stared, wondering what sort of test she was supposed to do, Ladia's voice sounded from an overhead speaker. "You should see a grid pattern of red balls, right?"

"Right."

"They're going to start turning green, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Your job is to tap the green balls, turning them back to red. You can use any part of your body you want—feet, hands, elbows, even your forehead. Whatever will let you touch the balls the fastest. Now, make sure your PAI is managing your reflex coprocessors and has them set to zero enhancement for now. We'll do your baseline first." Juliet didn't have coprocessors for her new reflexes; Angel handled everything. She held up her thumb and readied herself, bending her knees and lifting her hands in a fighting stance.

A ball near the center left turned green, and she jabbed out her fist, hitting it almost immediately. It turned back to red, and then another one lit up green just one row down, and Juliet quickly jabbed it. She couldn't feel the balls, but they made a satisfying *pop* sound as she hit them and flashed briefly before turning red again. She continued hitting them one by one for several seconds, and then things sped up, and she found she had to strike out with more than one limb to stay on top of the flashing, green orbs. She kicked and punched, kicked and stumbled, laughing as she valiantly tried to keep the lights all red.

After a while, when there were at least two orbs persistently green, no matter how hard Juliet tried to swipe them all back to red, the balls flashed three times, and a *ding* sounded. "We have good measurements, Juliet. You did very well, by the way! This is a standardized test, and your baseline is in the eightieth percentile for unenhanced humans, even considering your augmented arm."

"Humans?"

"Well, there's also a data set for synths, and they generally outperform humans." She paused momentarily, then said, "The test has a five-minute rest period. Go ahead and stretch or focus on your breathing. Would you like some water?"

"The balls changing color is random, right? I don't want to subconsciously cheat by expecting them ahead of time. And, no, no water, thanks, Doc."

"I'm pretty sure they're random."

Juliet nodded, then began pacing around in a small circle, shaking her arms and rolling her neck, trying to get loose. If this went how she expected, she'd be activating all her enhanced muscles and ligaments for the first time, and she wasn't sure how it would go. Even if she only used her cybernetic arm, she'd only ever done that for a second or two at a time. "Don't let me fry my brain, Angel."

“Of course not. I’ll be monitoring you closely. You’ve always been very resilient to accelerated synaptic activity. The truth is, I’m usually overcautious, stepping down your synapse speed long before I see any signs of stress.”

“Good. I’d rather not get some kind of involuntary twitch or mental tick; I’ve seen some messed up bangers with cheap speed jobs.”

“Like Don.”

“He wasn’t a banger, but, yeah, I don’t ever want to be like that.”

“Funny, the distinction you just made, almost like you were defending him, and I wonder why you would do that for a monster?”

“I don’t know. Operator’s pride? Forget it—Don might as well have been a banger for all we know about him.” A timer had appeared above the balls, and Juliet glanced at it. “Two minutes. You ready?”

“I’m ready. Are you?”

“Almost.” Juliet bent to pull her socks off, throwing them over by her gun. “Don’t want to slip.” She moved to stand in front of the floating, glowing balls again. “Don’t turn it on until we have to.”

“Understood.”

“Thirty seconds, Lucky. Are you ready?”

Juliet held up her thumb and watched as the timer ticked down toward zero. When it read ten seconds, she readied herself, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet. An orb near the bottom left corner turned green, and she kicked it. A second later, another changed right in front of her, and she punched it. Just like before, she managed fine for several seconds, enough to get a little winded, and then the balls started to flash almost simultaneously, and she felt Angel kick her into overdrive.

Suddenly, the balls were changing from red to green so slowly that she could watch the green propagate out from the center in a slow-motion flash. She snapped out her fists, extinguishing the two currently green balls, and it felt like five seconds before another ball changed. She snapped out her leg, kicked it, and had to wait again for another ball to change. Because she was focusing on the orbs, it didn’t seem like she was moving that fast; it was more like the changing colors had gotten slower. At first, the only thing that gave away her ramped-up speed was a sensation of weight as her fists and feet snapped out. They moved so fast that the force threatened to pull her out of balance.

Her test continued for what felt like another thirty seconds or so before it started to feel like the balls were lighting up quickly again. As she hurried to strike them, slowly growing accustomed to the increased force of her blows and compensating by tensing the appropriate muscles to keep herself centered, a new sensation began to pervade her body—heat. It started as a warm glow in her biceps, quadriceps, and glutes, spreading outward from there. As she beat the green orbs

into submission, her entire body began to radiate palpable heat, and she knew if she stopped concentrating on the task at hand, she'd find herself drenched in sweat.

It felt like she punched and kicked for ten minutes, but she knew her perception of time was skewed with Angel cranking up her synaptic speed. Still, the balls didn't seem to be changing any faster, and she knew she could have kept going if only her biobatteries hadn't run out of juice. She suddenly found herself swinging her flesh and blood limbs like they were buried in molasses. Angel, recognizing her defeat, slowed her synapses, and suddenly, the balls were flashing from red to green so rapidly that she had trouble focusing on them all. Juliet fell to her butt, laughing, wiping the sheen of sweat away from her beet-red face.

"Outstanding, Lucky!" Doctor Ladia announced through the speaker. The door snicked open a moment later, and she strode into the room. "I've never seen anyone maintain speed like that for so long! Two and a half minutes! Are you feeling all right? My scanner array didn't trigger any alerts, and I know your PAI would be monitoring you . . ."

"I'm fine, Doc. Just hot." Juliet smiled up at the doctor sheepishly, indicating her soaked t-shirt.

"Amazing! I wonder, did your PAI manage your intracranial heat with that implant you had me install?"

"I did," Angel said smugly.

"She did."

"Incredible. Well, you scored in the top one percent of full-body speed-augmented individuals, and you're off the charts with duration. The scale tops out at ninety seconds. You know most people manage speed like that in short bursts, right?"

"Oh, I know. This is the first time I've done that for longer than a second or two."

"Did you stop because of the heat?"

"No, I burned all the juice in the bio-batts for my reflex augmentation." Juliet smiled and leaned back on her elbows, feeling strangely good in her drained state. She almost felt like she'd just had sex. The idea made her laugh, and she shook her head. "Doc, do you have something I could eat? I'm drained as hell."

"Tricia? Go next door and get some takeout, would you? My usual, but double." Ladia held a hand out to Juliet. "Come, let me help you up, and then we'll sit in my office. It's cooler in there." As she tugged Juliet to her feet, the doctor continued, "Lucky, your Cybergen reflexes boosted your baseline by 297 percent. Your BioFusion arm topped out at 315 percent. Obviously, your synaptic implant managed the difference just fine; you looked like grace personified during that test. I'd be lying if I said I could do anything to improve those speeds."

"Really? Well, thanks, Doc. I didn't expect to be able to do a test like this, and it makes me feel a lot better. It sure felt good doing that, you know? I feel good. What a . . ." Juliet stopped speaking, suddenly realizing why she felt so good. She'd just literally blown off a bunch of steam. "I need to go all out more often, I think." As they walked back into Ladia's office, Juliet stood in front of an air conditioning register while Ladia organized some things at her desk. After

a minute, Juliet turned back to the doctor. "I guess I'm good with speed for now. Let's talk about a new data jack and a weapon for my left arm."

"Of course. Tricia will be here in a minute with a snack, and we'll write everything up."