

Juliet didn't panic because she recognized the voice. She lifted her hands, but casually, and slowly turned around. "Really, Sergeant Hines? Put my hands up?"

"Well, after reviewing the footage from the warehouse, I thought I should be careful if I startled you."

"So, a veiled threat rather than a hello?" Juliet smirked as she turned her hands in the air. "Can I put these down?" Hines was standing about five meters behind her in the quiet access corridor, and he wore civilian clothes, not his uniform. He had a pistol tucked into his waistband but wasn't reaching for it. He didn't look like he intended any sort of threat.

"Yeah, I guess so. Don't shoot me, though." He gestured to the cameras in the corridor and tapped his temple next to his left eye. "You're on camera."

Juliet sighed, put her hands down, and leaned one shoulder against the wall, trying to look more relaxed than she felt. Her mind kept running down different avenues, looking for clues as to how and why he'd found her. "What's this about, Sergeant?"

"Well, Lucky, I looked up that hangar where you said you'd been sleeping. Saw a person access it a couple of times on camera, but, oddly, their face was scrambled—different ID pings each time, too. Not exactly a high crime, but still makes a guy like me curious. Then there's the fact that an obvious shell corp leased the hangar—nothing much on the books about 'em. So, I camped out around the port for a few days. Not literally, mind you, but let's just say I appreciated the time out of the station. Been a while since I did a good old stakeout. Saw you walking in. No offense, but I'd recognize that walk anywhere. If you wanna hide from an old pervert like me, you need to change more than your face."

"So? What can I do for you, Hines? Gonna arrest me for valuing my privacy?"

"Well, I *could*. There are guys down at the station who wouldn't bat an eye. Still, it seems kind of petty, considering you saved one of our own. That kid, Watkins? He pulled through—if you were wondering. His dad was my partner for a while, back in the day, so it kind of means a lot to me."

"Well, if you tracked me down to give me some flowers, I'd have to ask why your hands are empty." Juliet continued to lean against the wall, and Hines stepped closer, shrugging.

"You joke, but, yeah, I wanted to thank you for real, and I wanted to have a better way of contacting you. Wouldn't hurt to have a friend in Luna City Security Corp, and, well, I could use a friend outside the department from time to time. It's not a straight climb up the ladder. You gotta understand that, even if you never worked for a corp. Sometimes I have to think outside the box, if you know what I mean."

"Up the ladder? Gunning for lieutenant? Look, Hines, I don't do wet work, at least not intentionally."

"No, no!" Hines opened his eyes wide, waving a hand in negation. "Nothing like that. A little snooping here and there. Moving on a tip that isn't quite solid enough to send in the uniforms—that kind of thing."

Juliet frowned. She kind of liked the guy, but she didn't like corpo-sec, and Luna City Security was most definitely compromised; it had been uniform-wearing members of that corp who'd

kidnapped Honey and Lilia for Levkin. She folded her arms in front of her chest and said as much, "I've seen how dirty some of your coworkers are, Hines. I'm not eager to help out Luna City Security. I stepped up to help that hostage because those gunmen were psychopaths. Well, at least the one I shot was."

"Fair enough; you don't know me yet. Just give me a secure line, will you? If I have a job for you, off the books, maybe you can evaluate it on the merits."

"Off the books, huh? Tell me this, first: Are you the only one keeping tabs on me, or do you have some flunkies watching me, too?" Juliet locked eyes with him as she asked the question, opening her mind, listening, trying to catch a hint of the sergeant's inner monologue.

"Huh, yeah. Just me." Along with his words, tumbling in a jumble, were several snatches of thought:

*. . . only knew what a shitshow the department is . . . would I be bugging you if I could trust anyone closer? . . . goddamn, those are some eyes. Jesus! Do I look away? I don't want to . . .*

"Okay, Hines. I'll send you an encrypted number. Reach out if you have something for me, but no promises. Also, quit creeping around watching me!"

Hines was an average-sized man but looked stocky in his filled-out, late-middle years. He apparently had a love-hate relationship with his razor, keeping his gray stubble just long enough to look sloppy. His skin was more pink than tan, and his eyes were set in dark hollows liberally decorated with deep crow's feet. The look behind those eyes was bright and sharp, though, and Juliet didn't doubt he was a clever guy who could get things done. Still, it was kind of funny when he blushed at her words and said, "Listen, um, about that, what are you doing out here in this corridor? Your ship's half a click further in. I mess up some kind of meet?"

"Nah, I just had a fight with a friend this morning and wanted to walk around. Clear my head, you feel?"

"Oh, right, right. Must be why you were smiling and laughing to yourself when I popped up."

"Jeez! Give it a rest, Hines. Thought you were trying to build some trust here."

"Yeah, no. You're right. Sure, sure. Out for a walk around the quieter hangar terminals." He sighed heavily, shaking his head, and, with a slight limp, turned back the way he'd come. "I got your contact info. I'll be in touch, Lucky. Don't leave me hanging, all right? Hate to have to hunt you down again." Juliet watched him walk out of sight, turning at the next junction. He moved like he was sore in most of his joints, and she wondered what his deal was. Surely, he made enough on his corpo salary to get a bad joint or two redone.

"Maybe it's an injury that's yet to mend," Angel said, uncannily guessing Juliet's line of thought. "Did you read anything from him? Should we be worried?"

"We should always be a little worried, but I think he's legit. Seems he doesn't exactly have friends in the department. The bigger question is what are we going to do about the cameras around the port? Think we could get Fido in?" Juliet smirked, shaking her head. "If Hines can figure out who I am by my 'walk,' someone else might." She continued in the direction she'd

been going when Hines had surprised her, right past the *Wing's* hangar. She saw her hired security guard slowly approaching, continuing his patrol, giving her a long, penetrating glare.

"Was he watching Hines and me?"

"Yes. When I analyze the sound from your conversation, I can hear his steps approaching and stopping approximately thirty meters away as he observed your interaction."

"Good."

"Regarding the camera system, I'm annoyed we didn't breach it already. Annoyed at myself, that is. I don't recommend going into Athena's hangar right now, but I'll use one of the mechs to gain access to the camera network. It shouldn't be difficult; Luna Space Port offers camera monitoring of hangar interiors, so there's bound to be an access point inside. I'll use the mech to open it up and insert Fido. Once we own the surveillance network of the port, you can come here safely again."

"Just don't let anyone see you piloting one of these guys around in there."

"Of course not. If someone did happen upon me—who that would be, I have no idea—I'd pretend the mech was performing a simple cleaning or maintenance program."

"Well, in that case, I'll pick up the AUI chip for Aya later, maybe tomorrow. You think he'll have access by then?"

"It's a safe bet. I'm sure the ICE is sophisticated here, but Fido has learned much, especially from his time in the New Atlas Port Authority security network."

Juliet continued to the next access hub, and then, her morning plans ruined by Hines, she meandered her way back to her bike. She had hours to kill before she met Honey for lunch and decided she'd spend some time shopping. She took a leisurely ride into the city, aiming for Royland Park where, if rumors were to be believed, she could find a semi-permanent flea market. It was a place where people who couldn't afford retail shops came to hawk their wares, and others came to unload goods for a, hopefully, better price than the pawn shops in the city.

Juliet had heard about the market from a wiring specialist they'd had working on the gunship recently; he'd been boasting about his new multimeter, saying he only paid twenty-five bits for it. Of course, Juliet had been intrigued; she loved a swap meet or flea market, and he'd done a good job selling her on the idea with lines like, "You won't find stuff like this anywhere else on Luna. You'd have to go to Earth for a deal like that!"

When she arrived, the scene wasn't encouraging. She could see tents and tables in organized rows, but the crowd was thin and unenthusiastic. "Morning shopping, I guess." She parked her bike and stowed her helmet, then, hands in her coat pockets, started wandering up and down the aisles, walking on well-worn gravel paths. One thing the guy had said was true—this place was pretty much permanent. Juliet couldn't see any sign of the grass that used to be underfoot.

She could smell popcorn and something vaguely Mediterranean, but she wasn't hungry and didn't want to spoil her lunch. Some of the tables were bare, with no shopkeeper in attendance. Others were loaded with merchandise that looked like something Juliet could pick up at a big box store, but it was only marked down a little, despite the obvious last-gen nature. Still, there

were occasional gems, like a man selling hand-carved wooden animals. She watched for a minute while he worked on a wolf, gently and methodically peeling away curls of wood with this sharp little knife.

“What kind of wood?”

He squinted up at her through dim, cataract-clouded eyes. “All kinds. I like hard, dark wood, but I take what I can find. This is just pine, but that bear is walnut, and the pretty pale dolphin there is maple.”

Juliet reached for the dolphin, but before she touched it, she paused. “May I?”

“Sure.” He nodded, rocking in his low, wooden chair. He refocused his wizened countenance on his carving, leaving her to scrutinize his work. Juliet picked up the dolphin. It was only about the size of her thumb, but it had a warm, smooth finish that felt good in her hand. She liked the way the dolphin almost seemed to be smiling.

“I think Aya would like this.”

“Are you thinking of getting her a gift?” Angel asked.

“She’s always getting books and stuff for us. I should give her something.” A little tag on the dolphin read ~25. “Pay him fifty bits, Angel.” Aloud, she said, “I’ll take it. Do you have a box?”

“Ah. Generous! Thank you.” He reached under his table and lifted a small yellow cardboard box filled with soft synthetic cotton fluff. “This will fit that piece nicely.” Juliet tucked the carving into the box, closed the lid, and then stuffed it into the inner breast pocket of her jacket.

“Thanks,” she said, walking away, but the old man just smiled and nodded, carving away at his lump of pine. She felt better about her wasted morning having purchased a gift for Aya, and, small as it was, she was excited to see her friend’s face when she opened it. “I love it ‘cause it’s totally out of the blue. I wonder what she’ll think!”

“I, too, am excited! It’s fun anticipating a person’s reaction to a gift. We should do this more often.”

“That’s not a bad idea, Angel.” Juliet laughed, continuing her perusal of the goods on display. She almost bought Bennet a grip strengthener but figured it was a little too on the nose. She was about to leave, having wandered for nearly an hour when she passed by a jewelry merchant for the fourth time. She paused and looked over the “hand-made” jewelry again, her eyes lingering on a plain silver chain. She fished around in her pocket and pulled out the flattened lump of polymer that had almost separated her brain from her skull.

“Do you do custom work?”

The proprietor, a small woman with long black hair fixed in a single thick braid, looked up at her from the plastic and aluminum folding chair on which she reclined. She had mismatched retinal implants—one pale brown and pretty, the other solid black with weird, light-refracting lenses that made Juliet uneasy as she looked into it. The lenses seemed to shift with the light, or maybe the light shifted through them, which gave the eye a weird, animated appearance. “Natch.”

It took Juliet a second to remember “natch” meant naturally, or as the woman meant it, “obviously.” “I think your stuff’s pretty, and I have kind of a weird request.”

“Love weird. Whatsit?” She leaned forward, focusing on Juliet’s closed fist.

“Oh. Well, I almost got shot in the head a while back through foolishness of my own. I like this as a reminder.” Juliet held out the lump of dense, pale-blue polymer.

The young woman took the lump and held it up, scrutinizing it with her strange eye. “Nasty thing for your brain, but pretty if I work it some.” She refocused on Juliet. “You want me to?”

Something about the woman’s odd affect made Juliet feel at ease. Some part of her expected eccentricity from an artist, and she kind of liked it. “Yeah, I want you to.”

“Okay if I’m creative?” The woman closed her fist around the lump of polymer.

“Yep. Up to you.” Juliet stared at the universal code pattern painted on the table, getting the name of her business and her contact info. “Raven Rose? That’s you?”

“The only. Give me a week, okay? I can courier it, but if you want to come back here, that’s fine.”

“Sure. I’ll message you in a week, and we’ll see how it’s going.” Juliet narrowed her eyes and leaned closer to the small woman. “I’ll pay well for your work, but I’ll also be very annoyed if that disappears.”

“Relax, merc. Raven doesn’t lose things.” Her response brought a smile back to Juliet’s face; somehow, it felt right that the woman spoke about herself in the third person.

“Great. See you soon.” Still grinning, she stood up, stretched her lower back, and looked up at the thin atmosphere of the dome. Her AUI said it was just about ten thirty, and she had a ten-minute ride to meet Honey. Feeling good about her first visit to the flea market, Juliet returned to her bike and, still taking it nice and easy, drove to the restaurant. “Message Honey, please. Give her our ETA.”

“Her PAI responded; she’s early and has a table on the sidewalk.”

“Oh, nice. Any parking?”

“Tapas on the Moon provides a live feed of their storefront, and I can see several metered parking spaces available.”

“Not busy, huh?”

“Well, to be fair, it’s Wednesday, and you’re ahead of the lunch rush.”

Juliet shrugged at the reply; she wasn’t expecting much from a place with a name like that. Still, Honey said it was good, so she’d keep an open mind. When she pulled up, she was only a few dozen meters away from the restaurant’s patio area, and she saw Honey right away. She wore a stunning, creamy yellow designer pantsuit, had her hair tucked under a matching sun hat, and

half her face obscured by old-school sunglasses. She looked like a celebrity. Juliet looked down at her leather jacket, t-shirt, and jeans and almost turned her bike around.

“Is she overdressed or am I underdressed? She said lunch, and I figured it would be like old times.” Honey hadn’t noticed her yet. Or perhaps she’d seen a person in a motorcycle jacket and dark, sparkly helmet and figured she wasn’t anyone she knew.

“Juliet, just look again at the restaurant. There are several people seated who don’t look any more casual than you.” Juliet looked, saw the people Angel had highlighted, and sighed with relief, realizing she wouldn’t look absurd. Well, until people saw her next to Honey, she supposed. Groaning with dread, she stood, pulled her helmet off, and secured it to her bike. When she started toward the restaurant, Honey almost immediately saw her and hurried to her feet, waving her over. Her smile banished Juliet’s discomfort, and she brushed past the hostess standing near the roped-off seating area and grabbed her friend into a tight hug.

“God, you look good!” she said into her hat, which was all she could see as they embraced.

“You look amazing!” Honey pushed her back, holding her shoulders as she looked Juliet up and down. “Did you get taller?”

“Hah, no. It’s just my boots.” Juliet glanced down at her well-worn work boots.

“That’s noise! You were always wearing those things when we were together. I think I’m just spending too much time with Lilia and forgot what it’s like to be around a regular chrome princess, yeah?”

“Chrome princess? You really throwing that one at me?”

“Well, look at those eyes and hair! Your skin’s glowing! Are you pregnant?” Honey laughed as she sat down, gesturing to the seat across from her.

Juliet sat and sighed happily. Honey was definitely sounding more like her old self. “Dunno how that’s possible unless it was that VR date I went on . . .” she trailed off, laughing, unable to keep up the joke.

“You’re too much. Seriously, though. You look fantastic. Guess work’s been good?”

“Haven’t really worked all that much. Was training, you know, learning to pilot, and got caught up in some business, but, yeah, since I’ve been back, I’ve been taking care of myself. The skin? That’s all nanites cleaning up my food before my body gets ahold of it.”

“Well, that’s the next thing I’m saving up for!” Honey laughed. “Speaking of saving up, wow! What a cool bike!”

“Oh, don’t start! Look at you in that designer outfit. Why didn’t you warn me? I look like a bum.”

“This?” Honey grinned, and Juliet could see the mischief in her eyes. “I had to buy a new wardrobe when we got back from, well, you know. Anyway, the places Peter took me to shop didn’t exactly have my old style.”

“Mhmm. And how is he? How are they, I mean, Peter and Lilia?”

“Really good, J.” Honey’s eyes widened, and she slapped her hand in front of her mouth. “Lucky.” She winked. “They’re good. Lilia’s busy with tutors for a few hours a day, so I was hoping we could spend more time together while you’re in town. God, I’ve been so anxious for you to get back! What do you think? Want to help me find a dojo? Or, heck, I’d even join a regular gym if you want.”

“A dojo?” Juliet grinned and leaned back in her chair. “Let’s order some food, and then I have an idea I’d like to run by you.”