

Juliet stood in the open bay doors of the hangar, pacing back and forth in the late afternoon sun, waiting for Sergeant Hines, and watching Bennet and Aya devour the donuts she'd planned to save for morning. She couldn't blame them; something about having a gun pointed at you and being slapped around by a thug made a person hungry. In fact, Juliet was contemplating one, herself, which made her think about the donuts she and Nick used to get back on Callisto, which made her think about Nick's constant vaping, which ended up just making her sad.

Aya sat on Juliet's bike sideways, both of her small feet balanced on one foot peg while she ate, and Bennet sat in an old, beat-up lawn chair, squinting into the sky, enjoying the tail-end of Luna's day cycle. Juliet looked at the open box of donuts on Aya's lap and walked over, reaching for a pink-frosted, chocolate one. "This will ruin our dinner."

"I didn't have plans," Aya said, licking some glazed frosting off her thumb.

Bennet shifted, using his hand to shade his eyes so he could more easily look at Juliet. "I'd say getting mugged deserves a treat."

"It's all fuel for your gains, right?" Juliet smirked.

"Exactly! Too much fuel? Time to pump out an extra set, you know?"

"Are you guys sure you're both all right? I can call a cab if you want to go to a clinic . . ."

"For a busted lip? I'm fine."

Aya shrugged. "They didn't hit me. The big one just twisted my arm a bit."

"Speaking of the big one, I wonder if you gave him brain damage." Bennet laughed, shaking his head. "That crack to the dome was brutal!"

"Still don't know what happened to his finger . . ." Aya frowned in contemplation, staring at her donut. Juliet had played the question off pretty smoothly earlier by saying she'd thought Aya did something and then feigning ignorance.

"You sure you didn't grab it? He sure seemed to think it was you." She almost felt guilty playing dumb with her, but the whole thing was also kind of funny—the mysterious dislocated trigger finger.

"If I did . . ." She trailed off, took another bite of donut, then grinned, teeth full of frosting. "Then I'm losing it!" Bennet and Juliet laughed, and, once again, the matter was dropped as the conversation moved on.

"You sure you can trust this corpo drone?" Bennet gestured up the street as though indicating the imminent arrival of Juliet's contact.

"Not at all. I won't tell him anything that'll get us in trouble. I mean, you guys realize we're the victims here, right?"

"Tell that to the comatose thugs taped up in the airlock," Bennet laughed.

“Good point, but the facts remain. They came here to rob us. Still, I’ll make it a condition of our deal that Hines keeps our names out of any case files he builds. I think he’ll be happy for my help and be willing to bend the rules a bit.”

He shrugged. “How’d your thing with the doctor go? Gonna get some retractable helicopter blades installed in your spine?” Bennet tried to make eye contact while delivering his snark, but the sun in his eyes got in the way.

“Do they have something like that? Where do I sign up?” Juliet started walking in a circle, bending at the knees and flapping her arms. “I thought I had to get wings implanted in my arms! If I can get some helicopter blades . . .”

“You can’t tease her anymore, Bennet. She’s immune to you.” Aya held the box down, and Bennet made a show of resisting temptation and then giving in, snatching up, of course, one of the sprinkled ones. Aya looked at Juliet, watching as she took another bite of her donut, then asked, “Did it go well? Did you mention me?”

Juliet nodded, chewing. After she swallowed the fluffy, fatty, sweet pastry, wishing she had something good to wash it down with, she replied, “It was good. I have a few small things lined up, but nothing as cool as retractable helicopter blades. She’s looking forward to meeting you.”

“What?” Bennet groaned. “Aya, what are you planning? Please tell me you aren’t going to chrome out your arms or something.”

“What if I did? You have something against augmented people?”

Bennet, quick to joke and tease, scowled, and, for the first time that night, it looked like a genuine one. He didn’t reply, though, simply shook his head and continued munching his donut. Aya looked at Juliet, raising an eyebrow, and Juliet just shrugged. In an attempt to please everyone, something she rarely succeeded at, she said, “Ladia doesn’t push tech on people. She’ll give you an honest assessment and make sure you’re not doing anything you’ll regret. I trust her.” She brushed the crumbs off her hands, then stepped closer to Aya. “That reminds me! I got you a little gift; can you stand up so I can open the seat?”

“A gift?” The way Aya’s eyes lit up warmed something in Juliet’s chest, and she mentally made a note to give people presents more often.

“Yep!” She opened the compartment, pulled out the little box containing the carved dolphin figurine, and handed it to Aya.

“Ahem,” Bennet said, shifting in his seat, glaring at the two women.

“Oh!” Juliet laughed. “I got you something, too!” She retrieved the cosmetics gift bag Tricia had given her from the compartment and tossed it to him. “Top-end stuff, Bennet.” He caught the bag, his frown turning into a perplexed grin. Meanwhile, Aya opened the little cardboard box and gently lifted the smooth, polished dolphin from its cotton bed.

“A dolphin! Wow, it’s so expressive! Look at its eyes! I love it, Lucky!” Aya held it close to her chest, smiling into Juliet’s eyes, and then hugged her. “I haven’t gotten a gift in a long time! Shiro’s terrible at birthdays or . . . anything.”

“Hey! Not true,” Bennet mumbled, still pulling the tissue out of his gift bag. “I bought you a self-adjusting auto torque wrench just last week.” He pulled out a fancy decanter of pale blue bath salts, and his eyes opened wide. “Woah! You know I love a good bath! Thanks, Lucky!”

“There’s more!” Juliet laughed, surprised and delighted that he actually liked the gift. Aya let go of her ribs and turned to watch as Bennet pulled the hand cream out of the sack. His eyes widened, and he unscrewed the lid of the faux-crystal jar, sniffing the fluffy white cream.

“Oh, that’s nice! You know how calloused my hands get; this will be great.” He dabbed one of his thick fingers into the jar and rubbed some of the cream on the back of his hand. “It’s really silky; a little bit goes a long way. Thanks, Lucky!” He shifted as though to stand up, but before he could crush Juliet in an undeserved bear hug, the *whir* of an approaching sedan took everyone’s attention.

“That’ll be Hines.” Juliet watched the low, black, unmarked sedan glide to a stop about ten meters away from the bay door. Then, a rear door opened, and Hines stepped out. He wore a plain, simple gray suit but had his badge and gun prominently displayed on his belt. Bennet grunted and turned to go inside, but Aya sat down on Juliet’s bike again, watching.

He walked toward them, scratching at his perpetual stubble. “Afternoon, ladies.”

“Sergeant,” Juliet called by way of greeting. He strode forward, sighing and stretching as he pressed his hands into his lower back. “Some time in the gym might help those stiff joints.”

“Oh? Advice already? Sound like my daughter.” He nodded to Aya, eyeing the box of donuts she had propped against the bike’s handlebars. “Miss . . .”

“Matsui,” Aya said, hopping up to shake his hand.

“Hmm, Matsui, Matsui.” Hines rubbed his chin for a minute. “Rings a bell . . . ah, there we are—Aya Matsui, full-time salvage tech for Murakami LTD?”

“Mmhmm,” Aya performed a strangely perfect curtsey, miming the lifting of skirts and everything, then hopped back onto Juliet’s bike.

“Knew you had an in with the crew of the *Kowashi*. Didn’t know you were hanging out together in the industrial port warehouses.”

Juliet sighed. “Hines, you gotta quit trying to dig things up about me if you want me to work with you.” She jerked her thumb toward the open bay door. “Come on, I’ll show you the thugs that tried to rob us.” She led the way, and as they passed by the white van, she pointed at it, “They arrived in this thing. My PAI’s working on trying to trace its history; it’s a rental.”

“I can help with that. Question is . . .” Hines trailed off as he, for the first time, took in the full shape of the Takamoto gunship. “What is this thing? A fighter?” The ship was still naked, all its body plates gathered on the drying scaffolds where Aya had been painting them, but it was undeniably aggressive in design. “Jesus, look at the size of those barrels.” Hines leaned down, hands on knees, trying to get a better view of the three-barreled rail gun hanging under the ship’s nose. “Bet that could put a nice hole in a pirate, huh?”

“Yeah, it’ll pack a punch if we ever get it working. Come on,” Juliet waved him on, “they’re in the airlock at the rear.”

“So, what do you see happening here, Lucky? I’m not gonna earn any clout by writing up an attempted robbery.”

“Huh-uh. That’s not the plan. I’m going to track down their base of operations and deal with whatever gang is robbing warehouses and hangars around here. You’ll help where you can and take the credit when it’s all wrapped up. Then you owe me one. I scratch your back, you scratch . . .”

“Oh! Is that how that works?” Hines snorted, interrupting her. “We’ll see what pans out. It’ll be interesting to see how this investigation and, hopefully, bust go without running things through the department. I’m ninety percent sure some moles have been undermining my work for the last few months.”

“Trying to make you look bad?”

“That and trying to protect the subjects I’m investigating. It’s a dirty city, Lucky.” They reached the ramp leading up to the now-locked airlock, and Juliet led the way up, touching the control panel to show an internal view. Both men were still on the floor, basically hog-tied with enough tape to strap down a bull. She opened the door, and as the bolts *thunked* open and air hissed out, she looked back at Hines.

“These guys are lucky to be alive. They had a gun against Aya’s head. You can arrest ‘em when we’re done, right? I don’t want to have to keep storing prisoners . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve got a patrol car waiting a block away. We’ll take ‘em off your hands and make sure they don’t see daylight for a while.” He followed her into the airlock and whistled when he saw the size of the goose egg on the bald guy’s head. “I’d say he is lucky not to be dead. What’d you hit him with? A sledgehammer?”

“Nah, just my pistol.” Juliet produced her vibroblade and sliced through the cords holding the men’s wrists tied to their ankles. They were both gagged with tape, but they’d gained consciousness, grunting and staring about with wide, bleary eyes. “Let’s start with the little guy.” Juliet ripped the tape off his mouth and shoved him, so he flopped over onto his back. He grunted in pain—his arms were awkwardly pinned behind him.

“Mmf!” he cried, clearly unable to articulate his jaw.

“Shut up, Ernie.” Hines squatted in front of him, grabbed his chin, and turned it to better look at the damage Juliet had done to his jaw. The movement elicited a cry of protest from the man as saliva dribbled from the corner of his crooked mouth. “Ernie Cavas, a dozen arrests for larceny-related crimes. Known to run with the Bedbugs, and originally from LA, Earthside. Not always happy with stealing, though, were ya? 2102 arrest for rape. 2103 arrest for aggravated assault.”

“Nof profecufef!” Tears streamed from Ernie’s eyes as he strained to speak through his broken jaw.

“Right, right.” Hines looked up at Juliet and winked. “Not prosecuted. Innocent, eh, Ernie? Well, you can’t tell us much right now, can you? How about this big ugly friend of yours?” Juliet took

the cue and bent to rip the tape off the boulder-shaped man. He snarled and belatedly snapped his teeth at her fingers. "Tough guy, huh?" Hines reached forward and flicked the great, purple bump on the back of his head, and the thug gasped in pain and tucked his chin almost like a giant turtle trying to pull its head into its shell. "Let's see here." Hines pressed the palm of his hand against the man's brow, tilting his head up so he could more easily look him in the eye. "Aha, bingo. Willis Battan, AKA Bullethead. Your rap sheet makes Ernie, here, look like a novice. Guess it won't be any trouble dumping these two into a bottomless hole, Lucky."

"Is he also a, uh," Juliet snickered, "Bedbug?"

"Willis has been associated with the Bedbugs, the 41st Devils, and as an independent operator working on contract. Lost your license a while back, though, didn't you?" Hines flicked the purple bump on his head again, and Juliet winced. On the one hand, she thought the thug deserved plenty of pain for how he'd treated Bennet and Aya, but on the other, she found it a little disturbing how much Hines seemed to enjoy it. Willis cursed and made some rather horrifying threats involving Hine's eye sockets, but he clammed up when Hines lifted his finger toward his goose egg again. "Quiet now. I doubt either of us is getting any sex tonight." He looked at Juliet and raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"What do you want to know? How are you going to go about, you know, tracking down their boss?"

"Oh." Juliet frowned, rubbing her chin. "I mean, I have my methods, but I thought if I worked with you, we should do things more legitimately. I thought you had a way to, like, get them to talk."

"Scum like this? The only reason these guys keep surfacing is because they don't mess with the wrong people; they steal from each other, from poor folks, and from working stiffs like you and your pals. They'll probably enjoy their time in Luna Correctional. Everything they tell us willingly, even if I offer them some kind of deal, will be at least half lies. If we were back at the station, I'd probably have my techs mine their PAIs for data. Half of these assholes have them programmed to wipe on removal, though."

"Oh, well . . ." Juliet pulled her data jack out of its housing, unwinding a meter of cable. "If I have your blessing, I can do some digging without removing them."

"Don't you stick that thing in me, bitch!" Willis strained against his bonds, rocking his enormous body back and forth. His head flushed, the pale skin darkening from pink to crimson, nearly matching the shade of the massive bump on the back of it. Juliet could hear the tape straining and creaking and knew that he would have broken out if Bennet hadn't triple-wrapped the guy with it. Hines lifted his hand high and brought it down on the guy's bump with a very satisfying *slap*.

"You're going to give yourself an aneurism, dummy." He looked at Juliet. "Why don't you start with the little guy? Ernie's not so violent."

"Ready, Angel?" Juliet subvocalized, holding her data jack a centimeter from Ernie's data port—he didn't have synth-skin covering it.

"Ready."

Juliet plugged the cable in then, having noted something off in Angel's tone, asked her, "Is everything all right? You've been quiet."

"I'm just not sure I like this Hines fellow. Are you sure we want to work with corpo-sec?"

"It's not about making friends or working together; it's about earning a favor from someone who might be in a position to help us someday. I mean, that, and I want to get these creeps to stop robbing buildings around us."

"What I'm doing right now to this man's PAI is quite illegal. If Hines were trying to entrap you . . ."

"He has me on vid plugging into this guy. I have him on vid telling me to do it. I don't think either of us will do anything with that. While you work, though, I'll try to listen to him a little." Angel made an affirmative sound, and Juliet looked up. Hines was watching her closely, leaning against the wall with one foot on Willis's shoulder. He reached into an inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a vape, and Juliet suddenly felt a surge of melancholy as she saw, in her mind's eye, Nick leaning against the side of the *Lady Hawk*, puffing on his vape.

Hines must have seen the gloom that descended over her. "Something wrong?"

Juliet shook her head. "Just thinking about an old friend. I'm going to have to concentrate here, so give me a few."

"Uh-huh." He sucked on his vape, and when he exhaled, Juliet could smell the mint. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to banish the feelings that threatened to constrict her throat and bring tears to her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Angel asked, probably guessing what was bothering her.

"I'm fine. Just thinking about Nick for a minute. It'll pass." Juliet took a few deep, slow breaths. Then, as the emotion began to even out, she pictured Hine's scraggly, jowly face, his deep crow's feet, and sharp eyes. On her next inhalation, she began to hear his thoughts.

Chick's hard at it. Concentrating. Never understood that jacking business; good thing I got hired on before they started requiring the CF-40 certification. What's she gonna find? Nothing? Something? Was this a waste? What else you got to do? God, my toe hurts. I told that doc the new meds weren't working. Feels like I've got ground glass in the joint. I'm gonna get the whole damn thing replaced! Sick of this BS health plan making me try every damn possible fix before they do it right. Can I use a supplemental plan to bypass the process? What if I sign up for just a month, do the procedure, then dump it? They must have safeguards to avoid that kind of abuse . . .

"I have something," Angel said, interrupting the sergeant's internal dialogue.

"I'm listening," Juliet subvocalized.

"I've found vid files showing this man meeting with your other prisoner, Willis, earlier this morning. They discussed what they'd do for the day, and Ernie mentioned that if they didn't score big today, Vicky would 'cut them loose.' I searched his memory for any mention of a Vicky

and found a self-deleting message log. He has the log set to delete conversations after twenty-four hours, but this conversation is only twelve hours old.”

“What’s it say?” As she asked, a text log appeared:

0549 – Vicky: Are you up, runt?

0555 – Ernie: I am now. What is it?

0603 – Got a job for you. Warehouse district; same neighborhood Jam’s crew got rolled. Irene saw the big guy working in a hangar. Rob ‘em. See what things look like—if that fast bitch is there or not. If not, we’ll take her little friends and use ‘em to lure her in. You think you can pull it off?

0614 – Why me? What do I do if she’s there? I’m not suicidal.

0617 – Wasn’t really asking. You’re doing this, and you can take some muscle with you. That bitch put my best crew out of commission. People are talking.

Juliet straightened up, eyes drawn in a glowering scowl as she grabbed the guy by his swollen chin and jerked his face to look her in the eyes. “Where can I find Vicky, you little shit?”