

"The Synth?" Bennet asked, stopping short at the question. "Why? Does it have something to do with this? I shut it down pending a scan, so I don't know how . . ."

"It didn't do anything. I mean, at least not here. Those," Juliet jerked her thumb over her shoulder vaguely toward the airlock, "assholes wanted it."

"And you fought to keep it?"

"They weren't planning to leave witnesses." Juliet frowned, her mind running in a dozen different directions, and finally settled on an order of operations. "Speaking of that, there's a deadly canister of nerve toxin back there. Can you secure it and yank the PAIs from all of these creeps? I'm ninety-nine percent sure they're dead, but just in case one of 'em has a sleeper nanite swarm or something, maybe shrink-tie them."

"Jesus," Bennet said, already hurrying past her.

"Bennet!" At her shout, he slid to a halt at the corner and looked back. "The synth?"

"Engineering!"

Juliet limped to the lift and hit the down button. "I'm just gonna check it out. That's all. Once I'm sure it's not an immediate threat, I'll get my shit together and get off the ship."

"You're so sure Shiro still wants you to leave?" Angel asked, her voice uncharacteristically small, quiet, even.

"I don't want to be sure, but he could've said something. I feel bad as it is for the trouble I brought to this ship. I'm not going to linger around when I'm not wanted. It's awkward, Angel." She stepped off the lift and continued toward Engineering, and that's when Aya came around the corner, saw her, and rushed forward, her bright yellow eyes wide with concern.

"Lucky! Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I need to check on that synth from the *Bumble*."

"Bennet told me what happened. Let me talk to Shiro. God, are you shot? You're leaving a bloody trail through the ship!"

Juliet looked behind her and saw that Aya was right; little droplets of blood led the way back to the lift. "It's . . . not fresh. My boot and sock got full of it, but I'm not bleeding anymore. Sorry for the mess, Aya. If Shiro lets me, I'll clean it up before I go." She squeezed her eyes shut as her voice cracked, emotion tightening her throat. Before she could open them back up and start walking, Aya smashed into her, squeezing her into a hug.

"You're crazy!" the smaller woman said, her voice muffled as she pressed her face into Juliet's vest. "I'll clean it, and if Shiro kicks you off the ship, I'm coming with you. I'll call my mom; she'll straighten him out; don't worry!"

"Come on, Aya," Juliet chuckled, a tear breaking loose from one of the pools growing in her eyes, dripping down her cheek. "I don't want to be where I'm not welcome. I don't want Shiro to

resent me, even if you can pull some family strings.” She snorted a brief laugh at the idea. “I’ll figure something out.”

Aya let go of her, then looked up, her eyes brimming with moisture beneath the jagged line of her self-cut bangs. “I wasn’t joking. I’ll quit if he kicks you off. You are welcome; he just hasn’t had time to think about it yet. Bennet told me what you did for those girls. You don’t deserve to be punished for that.”

Juliet sighed, forced a smile, and then started walking, resting a hand on Aya’s shoulder as she followed along beside her. “I appreciate that, Aya, but I did break a lot of laws, and I broke Shiro’s trust. I should have talked to him before I brought trouble this way. It’s a good lesson for me, but if there are consequences, I need to accept them. Let’s check this synth out, all right? One hurdle at a time.”

Inside the engineering room, they found Engineer lying atop a tool-cluttered workbench, completely lifeless. The last time Juliet had seen the synth, she’d asked him to pretend to be offline, but this was different; Bennet had truly shut him down. “Angel, does it hurt Synths to shut them down?”

“Not if done properly and with the synth’s cooperation. His conscious state will be preserved in memory, and when his systems are re-engaged, the saved image will precisely restore his consciousness.”

“What are you gonna do with it?” Aya asked. “I have diagnostic software, but it’ll take me days to get through all his file systems.”

“Sec,” Juliet replied. “Angel?”

“If you connect to the synth’s port, I imagine I can analyze his software and any firmware that’s referenced publicly. I’ll be faster than Aya’s software.”

“Gonna plug my PAI into it. I’ve got a few programs I can run.” Juliet fumbled with her data cable, struggling to grasp it with her damaged hand; her middle finger had, at some point in the battle, lost its black tactile pad. “Damn it!” she growled, trying to pull the cable out with her ring finger and thumb.

“Let me,” Aya said, her small, dexterous fingers snagging the cable’s adapter and pulling it out. “Just plug it in?”

“Yeah.”

“Which one? This guy has three ports.”

“That’s intriguing,” Angel said. “We’ll have to check each port in case one or more are on closed systems.”

“Start with the left one. We’ll have to check them all.” Juliet glanced around the shop and said, “Can you pull a stool over for me?”

“Yeah. Of course.” Just then, Juliet saw her crew comms light up and heard a crackle coming through before Shiro spoke, addressing everyone.

“Comms are back. Can I call Port Authority about the men who broke in?”

“Is he asking me?” Juliet asked Aya.

“Who else? He probably wants to be sure we won’t get in more trouble for, you know, the girls you brought.”

Juliet stared at her comms, and Angel, as always, intuited what she wanted, opening a channel. “You can. Bennet should put the girls in the gunship first, though. The same plan we had to help my friend, Bennet.”

“Uh, right. I’m just tying up these corpses still. Jesus, Lucky, there’s blood all over the place, and it ain’t all near the dead mercs.”

“Are you okay, Lucky?” Alice asked in the comms, and Juliet’s heart began to pound, and she once again felt emotions warring for control of her words.

“I’m okay. Listen, I have to check out this synth—find out why they wanted it and if more people will be coming for it. I’m sorry, Shiro; I’ll get out of your hair as soon as I can. I’m glad to hear you, Alice,” she finished, her voice quiet and low as she fought to keep it steady.

“Shiro, what’s she talking . . .” Alice started to say, but then she cut the comms, apparently not wanting to have that discussion publicly.

“Juliet, my heart is aching for you right now. I wish you could just go and lie down!” Angel said, not helping Juliet’s emotional state in the slightest.

“God, Lucky, are you okay?” Aya asked, staring at her, and Juliet knew she had tears on her cheeks again.

“Dammit! I’m so dang emotional! I think it’s the adrenaline, you know, the post-combat crash. Don’t worry about me, Aya.”

“Kinda hard not to. Bennet has some beer down here. Wanna raid his fridge?”

“Hell, yes.” She watched Aya go through the door in the plasteel wall she’d helped Bennet fabricate, and she smiled at the memory; they’d done a lot of bullshitting that day. When Aya returned with two cold bottles of pale beer, labeled in a language Juliet didn’t recognize, she noticed Angel didn’t immediately translate it on her AUI, likely too busy sifting through the data in Engineer’s memory. “How’s it going?” she subvocalized.

“While this synth’s directory structure isn’t standard, there’s not much that seems out of place or, for lack of a better description, alarming. I haven’t begun opening and thoroughly scanning the files that govern his personality or core behavioral scripts. I hoped to find something that stood out, an encrypted file or an image cache outside his normal memory tree. Have Aya switch the cable to another port, please.”

Juliet took a long drink of the slightly bitter beer, savoring the cool liquid as it breathed new life into her. With a sigh that reflected far too little sleep and far too many close calls in the last

twenty-four hours, she said, “Aya, move the cable to another port, please.” Then she drained the beer, suddenly thirstier than she ever remembered being.

“Damn,” Aya said, eyes widening as Juliet set the empty bottle next to Engineer’s motionless form. She unplugged the cable, shifted it to an empty slot, and plugged it in.

“Oh my,” Angel said almost immediately.

“What is it?” Juliet didn’t subvocalize, and Aya looked at her, perhaps wondering if the question was directed at her.

“This is a direct link to a storage device. There’s no connection to Engineer’s system; he wouldn’t be able to access this data.”

“What is it?” Juliet asked again, winking at Aya. Aya giggled at Juliet’s strange behavior, and Juliet realized she was already buzzed from the single beer. “Can I get another one?”

“Yep!” Aya hopped off her stool and hurried toward Bennet’s fridge while Angel tried to answer Juliet’s other question.

“The drive is password protected, but it’s not fully encrypted. I believe I can work through this ICE. Give me a few minutes, an hour at the most.”

“Okay.” Juliet looked up as Aya returned, handing her another beer.

“So? What’s up?” Aya gestured to her cable sticking out of Engineer’s skull.

“An encrypted drive. My PAI is working on it.”

“Oh? Exciting!”

Aya scooted her stool closer, and they sat quietly while Juliet nursed her beer, and when it was about halfway gone, she asked, “Do you think you could grab me some antiseptic wound gel and a couple of pressure bandages? I’m kinda stuck here until Angel gets through the ICE.”

“I can, but,” Aya held up a finger, “Bennet, are you coming to Engineering?”

“Yeah. Bringing the guns and PAIs down there.”

“Can you bring Lucky some antiseptic gel and some pressure bandages?”

“Sure, yeah. On my way.”

“Thanks,” Juliet said as Aya leaned on an elbow, resting it on the workbench and taking another sip of her beer—still her first one.

“I wasn’t being lazy, for the record. I just don’t want to leave you alone. You’re so pale right now.”

“I won’t lie; my eyelids are heavy as hell. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this drained.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“No. I was on my way back here to crash when Cel contacted me. She’s one of the girls I brought to the ship, the not-pregnant one.”

“So, you were up all night, had to rescue those girls in the morning, and then you got into a shootout on our ship?”

“Well, yeah.” Juliet, definitely feeling the beer, giggled and added, “But really, that was my third shootout for the day.” She burped and then said, “God, I should eat something. Do you think Shiro will get mad if I eat something before I leave?”

“No,” Shiro said from the doorway, and Juliet almost fell off the shop stool. She shifted, careful not to pull on her data cable, to look at him, and he smiled, though it was a smile that closely resembled a pained grimace. “Hai, uh . . .” he looked down and shifted uncomfortably. “Alice and I spoke. It, uh, well, we don’t think you need to go. Not yet.”

“Shiro, if you feel like you owe me something for stopping those guys, you should know I told Bennet to bring this synth to the ship. This is my fault just as much as everything else.” Juliet wasn’t sure why she was being so honest. She wasn’t trying to change Shiro’s mind; she’d felt a massive wave of relief when he said she could stay, but she also still felt a nebulous sense of guilt, some nagging self-doubt that told her she was a liability, someone who caused trouble or at least brought trouble with her. Did she want to risk the safety of these people she’d begun to grow so fond of?

“No.” Shiro shook his head. “I saw Bennet bring the synth aboard. I thought it was good, thought it might be worth something. You can’t take the blame.”

“Well, still, the girls . . .”

“No.” This time, instead of shaking his head, he chopped a hand sideways like he was cutting something in the air. “No. Alice is speaking with them now. I was a fool for judging you. They deserve help; you did good.” Something in his tone, something about the image of Alice lying in the infirmary talking to Cel and Rissa and then telling Shiro Juliet had done something good, broke the shaky dam Juliet had built up holding back her welling emotions. Her lower lip began to tremble, and tears streaked down her cheeks again, this time unabated. “Hey,” Shiro said, hurrying over and pulling her into a hug.

“You’re such a jerk, Shiro!” Aya said.

“Hai,” he said, pressing Juliet’s face into his shoulder, gently holding a palm against her braids. The warmth of his hand felt so nice, the simple gesture of affection so welcome, that Juliet began to sob in earnest, and she would have felt bad for all the tears if he weren’t wearing a pair of grease-stained overall. He continued to pat her head awkwardly and then haltingly said, “You are crew—as long as you want. Just, please, always message me before you bring refugees to the ship.”

“Thank you,” Juliet said between sniffs, her emotional release fading and leaving behind hot embarrassment. “I’m so tired! I swear, I’m not usually this emotional.”

"We've all seen how serious you can be. Don't worry," Aya said. "Shiro, she found something on the synth. She's trying to crack it."

"That's true," Juliet said, finally straightening up, pulling her face from Shiro's chest. She wiped at her nose and eyes, and then she saw Bennet lurking in the doorway, wearing a stupid grin, his arms full of rifles and ballistic vests. "Quit spying on us and bring me those bandages!"

"Hey," he cried, "I just got here!" He walked into the room, nodding at Shiro and winking at Aya as though he was in on some kind of joke. He piled the combat gear on another workbench and brought a red medical kit to Juliet. "Can I get you anything else?"

"I'd kill for a pizza . . ." At her words, Shiro made a choking sound, Aya squealed in delight, and Bennet laughed, shaking his head. "Too soon?" she asked, looking around the room.

"I've got some protein bars down here," Bennet said, still wearing that stupid grin.

"Aya, will you help?" Juliet held up the kit. "Shiro, you go back to Alice. I'll send you this information as soon as I get in." She gestured to the sleeping synth.

"Right. I will, but can we call Port Security? These men may have bounties, and we should report their attack; it will look suspicious if we don't."

Bennet, who'd been digging around one of his workbenches, held up two protein bars, then said, "I'll get the girls set up in the gunship and make sure no one wants to look too closely at it."

"Should be fine, Shiro. There's nothing connecting these guys to us other than this synth, and there's no way Port Security or, if you're checking on bounties, Port Authority will know about it."

"Good. Good," he said again, nodding. "If you don't break that soon, get some rest and try later." He didn't wait for Juliet's reply, turning and hurrying out, clearly eager to be back with Alice.

"I'll go set the girls up and then come back. If you're not sleeping by then, I can have a look at that hand of yours."

"Thanks, Bennet." Juliet's mouth started to salivate as he handed her the two "ice cream" flavored protein bars.

"Two of my favorites." He winked and then followed Shiro out.

"But what *kind* of ice cream?" Juliet asked, peeling the wrapper open. While she munched away at the sweet, nebulously-flavored protein blend, Aya pulled another stool over and helped her prop her injured leg atop it.

"Should I take off your boot?"

"Nah, just roll my pantleg up. It's my shin. See the hole?" Juliet knew her pants would be red with blood if not for their dark, stain-resistant synthetic fibers. Aya gently rolled them up to her knee, wincing in sympathy when she saw the puckered, raw bullet hole. "Squeeze that gel in there and then on my calf. After that, just apply the pressure bandages, and my nanites will do the rest."

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah, they turned off my nerves down there. It sure hurt like hell when it happened.” Juliet winced, remembering the jolt of pain that had gone up her leg when the bullet carved through her bone. “I held it together, though,” she said softly.

“You did. You’re the best operator I’ve ever seen, Lucky.”

“You’re half right,” Juliet chuckled. When Aya looked at her, puzzled, she said, “I’m lucky.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re a friggin’ rad bomb, and you know it. I knew it the second you saved Bennet and fixed that coolant leak. Nuclear as hell.”

“Come on, Aya! I don’t wanna start crying again. Let me get some sleep before you get all sweet like that.”

“Juliet,” Angel said, “You’ve received a message from Lemur. Displaying it.” Juliet took a steadying breath and, as Aya applied the bandages, she read the message in the window Angel opened on her AUI:

*Lucky,*

*I hope your reconnaissance went well. If so, we’ve got all the pieces of the puzzle. I’ve completed the preparations for our cover, and we have an appointment at the Xanadu residence the day after tomorrow at 4:00 PM. I have schematics for the home and, with them, a good idea of where our cargo is likely to be held. Xanadu sunset is at 6:07 PM. If you mapped out the passage through the old tunnels, we’ll use the darkness to aid our egress. Get back to me ASAP, please. If I need to develop an alternative, I’d like as much time as possible.*

*-Lemur*

“That’s good news,” Angel said.

“Yeah, it is,” Juliet subvocalized. “Will you let him know the old tunnels are a go? Also, let him know I’m sleeping—up all night and all that.”

“I will,” Angel replied. “Also, I’ve just bypassed the ICE on this directory—the information inside will be quite valuable.”