

Juliet stepped out of the cab onto the smooth sidewalk, looking left and right, admiring the illusion the park gave of a typical scene in any random Earth city in a temperate climate. She was still in the dome covering New Atlas, but here among the tall, genned elms and green grass, she had a hard time getting her mind to remember she was millions of kilometers from the home of humanity. “Where to?” she subvocalized, noting that the nearby walking path branched off in several directions.

“Lemur sent you a ping. Follow my guidance,” Angel replied, and sure enough, on Juliet’s AUI, she saw a yellow, dotted line appear on the path, leading straight ahead past the first branch in the trail. She followed it, stretching her back and neck, clasping her newly mended hand against the SMG swinging from her shoulder. She’d gotten a good day and night of rest, but now it was time to get to work, time to save Honey.

With each step, her leg throbbed a bit; her nanites had removed the nerve block at Angel’s insistence. She needed to be able to feel her foot to perform her best, and the pain wasn’t anything unbearable. With the nanites’ help, she’d healed as much in one day as most people would in ten. Again, she flexed her hand, wishing she’d already had the surgery she and Angel had sent payment for earlier that morning. The finger seemed to move fine, but Bennet had warned her about putting too much strain on it. “It’d be nice to be at one hundred percent,” she muttered.

The park grew more lovely as she ventured deeper down the walking path, the foliage doing an excellent job of drowning out the sounds of the city. It was the first bright, alive-feeling place she’d encountered in New Atlas, but she supposed that was mostly her fault; she hadn’t exactly been hitting tourist spots. She meandered for five minutes or so, and then she saw a little bridge crossing a babbling stream, and, on the bench before it, the ever-nondescript Lemur waited. Juliet tapped the deck hanging around her neck, activating her jammer, and approached. “Hey, hey,” she said, sitting on the bench beside him.

“Glad to see you face to face again,” he replied, shifting slightly so he could more easily look into her eyes. “Changed your style a bit since the last time.”

“Had some trouble with a local gang.” Juliet shrugged, “Figured it would be best to look a little different.”

“Nothing that’ll impact this op?”

“No.” Juliet didn’t feel like going into the details about her run-ins with the Jackals. She tried to steer the topic back to the business at hand, “IDs all set?”

“They are, but we need to get a little more specific about my payment. My apologies; I’m not trying to strongarm you now that the hour of our joint endeavor grows nigh. I’ve taken the liberty of arranging for Mr. Baskins—my cover—to disappear for a couple of days. That, combined with bribes and expenses for these IDs, has me in something of a hole. I’d like to ensure that I’ll be made . . . whole.” He raised an eyebrow, clearly pleased with his use of the homophones.

Juliet ignored it. “Right. So, twenty-five percent isn’t enough anymore?”

“Let’s talk bits. Twenty-five percent of what?”

Juliet looked around the park and saw they were quite alone. The nearest person was a woman wearing a bright yellow jumper, holding the hand of a little girl in a frilly white dress on the other side of the wooden bridge. If they weren't alone, it wouldn't matter—the jammer would turn their voices into white noise for anyone outside its little bubble. “Can I say his name here? The whole ‘let’s pretend we don’t know whom we’re messing with’ is a little tiresome.”

“Sure. I was mainly acting that way at the café because I wasn’t sure how read-in your friend was.”

“Okay, I’m assuming you’re going to want to look at the contract?”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Lemur smiled in that unassuming manner of his, friendly on the surface but danger lurking in his pale-brown eyes.

“Right. So, my client has offered me two-hundred k, with a bonus, if I bring back any incriminating evidence on Levkin.”

“And the size of the bonus?”

“Another two hundred.”

“Respectable. You acquired the contract. You incurred greater expense than I, considering you had to travel from Luna to here. You’ll be responsible for transport and safety all the way back. I’d like to propose I get paid one-third of the payment you receive from your client, bonus or not.”

“I suppose I could tell you to get lost, but then I’d have a lot of work to do that you’ve already done. My friend and the girl I’m supposed to rescue could be in danger, could be killed or moved at any time. All that and not to mention the chance that you’ll get your feathers ruffled and double-cross me—I guess I can’t really bargain, can I?” While she listed the ways he had her at a disadvantage, Juliet watched Lemur’s face, trying to relax, trying to let her mind drift toward his, reaching, grasping for stray thoughts. It was all figurative; she didn’t have control of fingers on her brain that could claw the thoughts out of his, but she still tried to imagine it happening.

*She’s clever. She knows she has to accept. She wants me to acknowledge the unfairness.*

“I understand it seems unfair, me taking such a big bite of your hard-earned contract. This isn’t a job someone would typically handle alone, however. You must realize that, no? Splitting the contract is typical for a job of this scale. I’m not a bargain-basement operator, Lucky. You can’t get away with throwing five percent my way. I can assure you my work will deliver results easily worth your investment.”

“Yeah,” Juliet said, smiling, too pleased with the fact that she’d read his thoughts without closing her eyes, mid-conversation, to feel like quibbling any longer. “Okay, it’s a deal. Contract?”

“We’ll keep this off the books until we’re done. I’ll send you a contract and payment request when your ‘friends’ are safely stowed away. Now, on that note, I’m to understand we’re looking for a young woman and a young girl?”

“That’s right.”

“Is she large? The woman?”

“No. Smaller than I am and very fit.”

“Excellent. We’re going to be wheeling some large cases full of ‘tools’ and ‘replacement hardware.’” He made air quotes as he spoke. “I’ve gotten us access to a server and surveillance room. I imagine there will be security inside, and we’ll need to go through at least one scanner where we’ll be searched thoroughly. Do you have a means to hide weapons?” He looked pointedly at her cyber arm.

“No. It’s just a plain arm.”

“I would like to suggest we could sneak in some weapons with our ‘tools,’ but I think it would be a risk. Are you skilled in hand-to-hand combat?”

“Reasonably so. If we have the element of surprise, I’m confident I could take someone out.” Juliet frowned, wishing she’d had more time at the dojo in Phoenix.

“So, we’ll plan on that. When we gain access to the surveillance room, we’ll need to neutralize the personnel there.”

“Uh,” Juliet said, reaching under her left sleeve and pulling out her vibroblade. “How about something small like this? Could you maybe attach it to a tool or some kind of tool kit? I mean, a vibroblade can be used for all sorts of things . . .”

“Ah, that shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll mix this among other similar objects—drivers, wrenches, box cutters, and the like. If they flag it during the search, it’s easy enough to explain away.”

“Good,” Juliet nodded, reluctantly handing over her favorite knife. “It’ll make it a lot easier.”

“Good, good. So, as you know, our appointment is in the afternoon tomorrow. I propose we meet outside of Mr. Baskins’ place of business, STO Security. We’ll be taking one of his vans to the location. The plan is to go in, overpower the personnel in the surveillance room, use the cameras to find our cargo, get to them, load them into the tool cases, load up into the van, drive part way, ditch the van in the forest, hike to the tunnel you scouted, and work our way back to New Atlas that way. We’ll separate at that point and take separate cabs away from the water treatment plant.”

“Uh, if we’re getting them out in the cases and are in the van, why don’t we just drive back to New Atlas?”

“Every second after we leave, we risk discovery. Someone will notice they’re gone, or someone will find the security officers we’ve disabled. It will be trivial to figure out they were taken in the van, and there are too many choke points between the house and New Atlas, too many places where we can be surrounded and apprehended. Better to let them look for the van while we slip away through the forest.”

“You’ll have the van drive itself back? A decoy?”

“Exactly!”

Juliet nodded, "I like it."

"That's what I like to hear. Shall I send your false ID information?"

"Yes. I'll program my irises and prints tonight." Juliet could tell he was getting ready to wrap things up, so she pressed ahead with a question, "What about clothes?"

"Wear something comfortable that will fit under overalls. I'll acquire some uniforms from STO." He smiled and slapped a hand on his knee, then asked, "Anything else?"

"So, no weapons? Other than the knife you're going to smuggle in for me?"

"Correct. We don't want to blow the operation before we get in."

"All right. See you tomorrow at . . ." Juliet raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, yes, yes. I was going to include this in the message containing your false ID information. We'll meet at three PM."

"Right. Okay, Lemur. Thanks a lot for the hard work." Juliet held out a hand, and he shook it, his palm dry and his grip firm. She tried to grasp onto his thoughts again, tried to get a feel for his level of loyalty, but nothing came, and before things felt awkward, she let go. He stood up and, without another word or a backward glance, started walking further into the park, following the path over the little bridge. Juliet stood up and returned to the street where she'd had Angel keep the cab waiting. "Let's go shopping."

"What sort of shopping?" Angel asked.

"I want a new gun or two, maybe some grenades. I want to buy some clothes for Honey and Lilia—we'll need something stretchy and comfortable; I don't know exactly the right size. Do we even know how old she is?"

"She'll be seven in three months." Angel sounded stressed, and Juliet understood why when she continued, "Juliet, Lemur told you not to bring weapons. I don't think clothing will be easily smuggled in, either."

"No, we're not going to smuggle them in. We're going to give them to Bennet, and he's going to meet us in the tunnel."

"In case we're pursued." Angel's tone changed dramatically as she put things together.

"Exactly. In case . . . of lots of things. I don't think Lemur will double-cross us, but I've learned to expect the worst from people like that."

"People like that?" Now Angel sounded almost naïve, and Juliet marveled at how weird it was that she knew so much but also so little.

"Shady operators whom I don't know well. People in this line of work. People who could make some bits at my expense. Take your pick."

“Understood. I think that’s wise, but are you sure you want to put Bennet in danger?”

“No, I’m not sure. You heard him before we left, though! He feels like he owes me; he wants to help. He . . . I don’t want to treat him like a child! Imagine how we’d feel in his shoes.”

“I think I understand. I’d be frustrated if a friend could use my help but refused it. I’m directing the cab to the gun store first. You’re fine with Duster’s Outlet again? They sell some attire that might be appropriate, and perhaps Sandra is working . . .”

“Yeah,” Juliet said, smiling as she sank back into the cushioned seat. “She was pretty cool.”

The cab reported that their route had a forty-minute delay thanks to some kind of march taking place downtown. Juliet had Angel look on the local net for information about the disturbance, and she showed Juliet a news report featuring a woman with a clean-shaven skull, bright silver and blue eyes, and truly stunning makeup—one of the most beautiful people she’d ever seen. The chyron identified her as Bella Charm, and she spoke at length, with breathless enthusiasm, about the workers of Atlas Corp staging a walkout and marching for better wages. She seemed to think their efforts would be in vain; Atlas had already issued a statement that they were in talks with several “employment groups” for labor replacements.

“What do you think, Angel?” Juliet asked after viewing the report.

“I think that woman is very intriguing.”

“No, silly, about the walkout.”

“I believe the workers have an uphill battle. There are more people than jobs in this city.”

“Yeah. It’s a tough deal.” Juliet rode in silence, thinking about the labor disputes she’d seen in Tucson. Of course, those thoughts brought up memories of her sister and how she’d lost her job at Helios, which had been the catalyst for her getting mixed up with bangers. After fidgeting for a while and trying to get her mind to think of something else, she gave up and said, “I’m not a very good sister.”

“Excuse me?” Angel replied, scandalized. “You’re the best sister I could ask for!”

“Oh, Angel. You’re so sweet,” Juliet sighed and then pressed on, “I mean, I didn’t use to be a good sister. I was . . . indifferent when my sister, Emma, started getting into trouble back in Tucson. I knew she was mixing with bad people, and my response was to distance myself, to talk shit about her to my mom, as though I could earn some points in some stupid secret game we played for my mom’s favor. I say ‘secret’ ‘cause we never talked about it, but we both knew we did it. In my mind, my mom loved Emma way more than she ever did me. I wonder what Emma thought. Do you think she felt the same? Maybe my mom was shitty to both of us. It’s funny how different my past looks now, with everything I’ve experienced since I met you.”

“If you try to contact her, it will likely alert WBD, but I very much wish we could. I think it would be wonderful if you could help her. Does she owe a fine to Helios? Is she incarcerated for debt, or did she commit a felony?”

“Both. She and some bangers got caught trying to boost some vehicles from a Helios satellite office.”

“Not too unlike your very first job.”

“Ugh,” Juliet cried, smacking herself on the forehead. “Don’t remind me! You wouldn’t *believe* how badly I judged her when she got arrested. God, I was such a *tool*.”

“Perhaps it’s something we should look into when you have the bandwidth.” Angel’s voice was sympathetic but firm, and Juliet was sure she was trying to get her to focus on her current obligations. It was hard to blame her; she had a lot on her plate.

Juliet rode the rest of the way in silence, trying to think about other things, but her brain kept stubbornly playing scenes from when she’d last shared an apartment with Emma. Arguments they’d had about money, about her friends, about corps, and how crooked they were. Was Emma really more anti-corpo than Juliet was? No, not now, but maybe back then. Had Juliet been that dumb?

Her mental spiral was brought to a halt by the cab’s arrival at Duster’s Outlet. She exited the cab, stowed her gun in a locker, and, after a quick sweep from the security guard, got busy shopping. The friendly sales associate, Sandra, wasn’t working, but a man named Skip was eager to help her. He was quite a lot older than Juliet, had a hugely bushy mustache, and wore a bolo tie around the collar of his Duster’s Outlet polo.

When Juliet told Skip she was interested in a couple of guns, he practically bounced with excited energy. The spare tire protruding around his too-tight belt jiggled as he eagerly led her over to the store’s back wall, where rifles hung on pegs and pistols sat in plastiglass cases. “What are we looking for?” he asked, his voice a little weird, a little too throaty, as he pushed his black-rimmed visor up on his nose. Juliet recognized the visor; she’d seen an ad for it back in Tucson—it was supposed to have targeting and light filtration capabilities that would “rival the best optics in the system!”

“Well,” she said, unable to contain the smile that had crept onto her lips, “I need a sidearm and a gun with a bit more punch than my MP5.”

“MP5? Good lord, what an old gun. Is it an antique?”

“It’s a Hershel Company model. A variant. It’s updated with modern parts and targeting software . . . among other things. Hey, Skip, why am I justifying my other gun to you? I’m looking for something like an electro-shotgun or a high-caliber rifle. Sell me on something.”

“Okay, okay, my bad.” He sniffed noisily then, resting a hand on the plastiglass case, he drummed his thick fingers and said, “Let’s do the sidearm first. You want something noisy with a lot of bang or something . . .”

“I had a nice Finch Executive needler that got blown up. I’m not sure I want another needler, but maybe I do. Does that give you any ideas?”

“Uh, sure. We’ve got tons of needlers. The Finch Executive is a nice little gun, but didn’t you find it a little small?”

“Well, I liked that it was very quiet with a suppressor. I liked that I could load different kinds of ammunition in it.”

"I've got another model by Finch," he said, strolling down the pistol display. "It's a little bulkier, but not much. It still has that sleek design." He stopped and ran a finger over the plastiglass, narrowing an eye as he looked at the weapons in the case, clicking his tongue strangely as he perused them. Finally, he stopped and said, "Aha! There she is, the Finch Enforcer." He bent at the waist, touched his thumb to the case, and when it beeped, he slid it open and pulled out a gun that could've been her old needler's big brother.

"Ah, yeah." Juliet nodded. "That looks a lot like my old one."

"Righto, but this one is chambered for six mil needler rounds. Your old one was four mil. The magazine holds twenty-nine rounds, and we sell suppressors. I also have a trigger upgrade I could install if you're interested. How about a laser sight?"

"Doesn't it have PAI integration?"

"Oh, yeah, of course."

"Then I don't need any sights added. I'm interested in the trigger upgrade, though."

"Sure! The stock trigger in this little beauty is decent, with a three-pound pull. I sell a lot of different upgrades, but my favorite is the Victory Tech Raptor. Its pull weight is only one-point-two-pounds."

"Can I look at it for a sec?" Juliet nodded at the gun in his big, pink hand.

"Sure." He handed her the gun, and she held it in her hand, aiming it at the back wall, admiring the heft. It was definitely larger than her old one, but it felt fine; she had long fingers. "Angel," she subvocalized, "explain to me why I want a lighter trigger pull."

"People argue that you will be more accurate if you don't have to strain against the trigger. A light trigger means you can press it with less chance of moving off target. Because it's semi-automatic, you should also be able to fire more rapidly."

"Isn't it more dangerous?"

"If you didn't have me or some sophisticated targeting software, yes. As it is, I won't allow the gun to fire accidentally, at least not if you were going to hurt someone."

"I ever tell you you're nuclear, Angel?" Juliet chuckled as Skip looked at her quizzically. "Talking to my sister, sorry, Skip."

"You have told me that, but I still like to hear it, sis," Angel said, and Juliet laughed.

"Skip, I'll take this with the trigger upgrade. I'll want a suppressor, so you can try to sell me the best one, all right? After that, let's talk big guns."

"What about ammunition?"

"Oh, for sure! Hey, while we're at it, do you sell grenades?" Chip's eyes bugged out, and Juliet laughed again, slapping him on the shoulder, and he joined in with a nervous chuckle.