

“Mmhhh,” Juliet mumbled, chewing her last bite of savory, slightly spicy spring roll. Ladia was showing her a series of holographic advertisements featuring different concealable weapon implants. Currently rotating above the little projector was an arm with a tiny barrel hidden in the ulna that would deploy out of a synth-skin port, firing toxic—or not—needles from a similarly tiny magazine. As she swallowed, she shook her head, “I like the idea, but I don’t want to have to unload my arm if I’m going through a high-security checkpoint. I’m talking about a last-ditch weapon here, something I can count on and won’t have to remove if an overly cautious security scan picks it up.

“Not a projectile, then? A blade or maybe . . .” Ladia trailed off as she tapped on her floating AUI. “How about this?” The holograph changed, showing a woman walking down a dark, suitably spooky street. Trash blew along the gutter, and failing streetlamps flickered. The woman pulled her scarf tight around her neck, and then, predictably, a man lurched out of an alley, accosting her. He grabbed her from behind, and she screamed, kicking her feet. As the would-be mugger or kidnapper lifted her off the ground and began to drag her back into the alley, the woman pulled something that crackled and zapped out of her wrist and wrapped it around her assailant’s hands, where they gripped her around the belly. He screamed, and with a sizzling *zwap*, his hands fell to the pavement. He stood there, dumbfounded, looking at the smoking stumps of his wrists. Juliet laughed; the overacting and melodrama of the advertisement was too much.

“Holy shit, Doc! You gotta hook me up with one of those. What’s it called?”

“This one’s made by FusionTech Armaments, and they call it a Volt Whip. It can be manipulated from the non-conductive tip, as you saw here, but you can also deploy it without using your other hand and, well, whip it around. The charge is good for about a minute of active use, and, as you saw in the ad, it’s supposed to slice right through most organic materials.”

“And it retracts automatically?”

“Yes, it says it’s deployable and retractable with commands given via your PAI.” Ladia frowned, then shrugged. “It should pass security more easily than a projectile weapon. There’s no barrel, and the coiled wire won’t look exactly like a weapon. In fact, if we place it carefully near your new data jack, it’ll likely look like part of that system on a scan.” Juliet and Ladia had already settled on a new data jack; it was more compact, had a more powerful wireless antenna, and held a hard-wired cable made of a much thinner, more flexible material than her current one.

“Unless this vid is exaggerating its capabilities, I’m pretty much sold on the idea.”

“I’m sure there’s some hyperbole here; it likely doesn’t cut so quickly or smoothly, but I’m sure it would hurt enough to get someone to let go.” She paused and squinted at something on her AUI, then added, “Hmm, actually, I’m not so sure they are exaggerating—under suggested usage, it says it can melt through common restraints, doorknobs, and even padlocks ‘in seconds.’ Should I order one?”

“Yeah, let’s put it on the list. If it’s no good, we can send it back, right?”

“Oh yes. This supplier won’t want to lose my business.” Ladia tapped on her invisible AUI for a moment, then smiled. “So, we’ve got the Swedish Biologic bone reinforcement nanite package, the Reaction Technologies Tightbeam 9 data jack, and the FusionTech Volt Whip. Am I forgetting anything?”

“Just those for now, but you told me you’d look into piloting augmentations. I’m mostly interested in a vascular interface port to plug into an acceleration couch.”

“Right. As I said before, I’m not sure, with your lung upgrade, how effective some of the more common piloting augments will be. I’ll research it. For the three augments we’ve settled on, though, we’re looking at 587k. Can you cover that? Should I pull up my financing software?”

“No, I can cover it. Can you get started with half up front?”

“Certainly. It’s not like you’re a new client, after all.” Ladia tapped away in the air for another few seconds, then said, “The nanites come inert and unbonded. I have to start culturing your stem cells, but that just requires a small tissue sample. Bone Marrow would make my job easier, but I can do it with something less invasive, even a normal blood sample. Let’s see,” again, she tapped at invisible icons, “mmhmm, I have four pints of your plasma in storage.”

“Wait, you do?”

“Yes, is that a problem? I make it a habit to draw some blood whenever I do a procedure. I like to be prepared in the event you need an emergency infusion.”

Juliet frowned, drumming her fingers. She didn’t know if making a scene about the doctor keeping her blood on hand would be worse than the doctor having some. “Go ahead and use that to make the stem cells, but Doctor Ladia, I’d appreciate you destroying any tissue or fluid samples you have from me, even if they’re not labeled with my name or ID. Will you do that for me?”

“Of course! Not a problem, Lucky. I should have known better; you’re not my only client who values her privacy. For the record, the samples are coded on an encrypted database. Anyone breaking into my clinic would find it impossible to tie them to a client.”

“All the same, I’d feel better not having my . . . fluids stored anywhere.” Juliet stood, folding the linen napkin Tricia had given her and placing it on Ladia’s desk beside her plate. Her metabolism, nanites, or both had long done away with the buzz she’d gotten from Ladia’s fine wine, and she felt perfectly clear-headed. “Send the invoice over, and I’ll forward you the funds, okay? Thanks for all of your time today, Doc.”

Ladia stood and came around the desk, reaching out to take Juliet’s hand in hers. “I truly look forward to your visits. You know I only keep clients I enjoy working with . . .”

“Oh, shoot!” Juliet shook her head, chuckling at herself. “I almost forgot! I promised my friend I’d give you her name. She’s one of the sweetest people I know and wants a consultation about getting an augment or two. Unlike me, she works for a living, so I’d appreciate it if you’d see her.”

“If you recommend her, I’ll happily sit down with her. Send me her contact info!”

“I will. Thank you, Doctor Ladia.”

"I should be thanking you; it makes my life easier when I don't have to hunt down good clients. Speaking of your friends, whatever became of that synthetic individual? You mentioned he might appreciate more . . . matching parts?"

"I tried to talk him into it, Doc, but he's kind of paranoid. His paperwork's less than legit, and he doesn't trust the ID I got him. He rarely leaves the port. I'll keep working on him, okay?"

"Sounds good. I'll be in touch; as soon as the nanites and the, uh, whip are here, you'll hear from me." Ladia led the way over to her door, and Juliet followed. On the way out, Tricia offered her a fancy little silver bag with an Aine Cosmetics logo sewn into the fabric. "Ah," Ladia said as Juliet took it, "just some sample hand cream and bath salts. The rep's always coming around to the clinic. Thank you, Tricia." As Juliet opened the bag and sniffed the heady floral fragrance, Ladia sighed, shaking her head. "I wish they'd get the clue; I'm not selling cosmetics here. Still, they make nice swag bags, and you can't say you walked out empty-handed."

Juliet held the bag up, smiling. "Thanks. Looking forward to hearing from you, Doc." With that, she pushed the door open to go and, on her way to the parking garage, asked Angel, "You think those purchases are good for now? Anything you think I should have brought up?"

"We talked about this; there are any number of implants that would make you a great deal more dangerous—bioweapons, projectile implants, military-grade EMPs, or even hardened exterior armor plates. The issue is that you're trying to maintain some subtlety. You're trying to ensure you can still pass through security checkpoints without being 'disarmed' or slowed or outright rejected. There's external equipment that can mimic or even outdo heavy-duty implants. As an extreme example, think of the Atlas exoskeleton. No amount of cybernetic augmentation would compete with what that piece of hardware can do for you. So, to answer your question, I think what you've ordered is good for now."

Juliet stowed her little cosmetics bag in her bike's seat next to her gift for Aya, and then she began motoring out of downtown, heading for Galaxy Donuts. She bought a dozen, being sure to get a couple of sprinkled, glazed, chocolate ones for Bennet; she and Aya were less fussy than the big musclehead. The box wouldn't fit under her seat, but she held it on the battery chassis in front of her, driving nice and slow, steering with just her throttle hand as she cruised the rest of the way back to the hangar. The bay door was halfway open, and she pulled into the workspace, parked her bike, and was just about to step off her bike when she saw a familiar van parked close to the gunship. "Angel," she hissed.

"I see it. It's the same van from the other night." Juliet squatted, set the donuts on the floor beside her bike, and then snatched her Texan from its holster. Her motorcycle was virtually silent at low speeds, especially when she wasn't accelerating, so it wasn't a big surprise that no one had noticed her arrival. "I can't access the local net. It's offline or jammed." Angel's announcement explained why Juliet didn't have the security cams up on her feed. It also confirmed that there was a problem.

She squatted there, listening as Angel slowly cranked up the gain on her auditory implants, looking for a clue. It took longer than she wanted, with thoughts of Bennet and Aya being hurt running through her mind, before she finally heard the muffled, distant sound of a garbled voice. "Where's that coming from?"

"Inside the gunship."

Juliet burst into motion, silently padding over the concrete to the rear of the ship, peering into the van as she passed by—tools and boxes, but no occupants. The rear airlock was open, explaining how she'd heard anything through the ship's densely insulated frame. Juliet still wore her helmet, but the visor was designed to provide optimal vision at night or in bad weather, so her vision was unimpeded. As she crept into the airlock, then up to the interior door—also open—she paused and listened again.

A high-pitched, sort of airy male voice came to her from down the access corridor, “. . . don't care about all that jack! We want the processors, the coils, the couplings, the ammo cartridges, and anything else worth more than fifty bits that'll fit in our van! Make it quick and keep your trap shut, and we won't hurt her.”

“Keep your pants on,” Bennet's voice replied, though Juliet detected a slightly garbled enunciation that wasn't usually there; it sounded like his mouth was swollen or maybe full of fluid. “Gonna need my tools.”

“Which ones?”

“My red kit. It's under the nose where I was working on the main gun.”

“Get it, Tic.” At the words, Juliet backed up from the opening and slipped her gun back into her holster. In a few seconds, she heard the sound of approaching feet clomping on the plasteel deck, and then a wiry man wearing yellow-lensed goggles and sporting a bright shock of purple hair, standing straight up from the top of his head, stepped into the airlock. Without hesitation, Juliet jabbed her cybernetic fist forward, crashing her knuckles into the base of his jaw, just beneath his right ear. He never saw it coming, never noticed her lurking there beside the doorway. He fell to the ground like Juliet had flicked an off switch.

As she tugged his limp, disturbingly light form away from the doorway, she subvocalized, “Why don't we have eyes in the gunship? The camera's offline?”

“There's a crude, powerful jammer active near the center of the ship; it's disrupting the wireless signals.”

Juliet grunted in acknowledgment, then pulled her data jack cable out of her arm and plugged it into the panel beside the door. “How about now?” A vid feed immediately appeared on her AUI, and Juliet studied the view inside the ship's little galley with an ever-deepening scowl. A man sat on one of the table's two built-in benches, facing out, away from the table. He was a big fellow, bulky in every way, with a bowling-ball-shaped head and no visible neck. He was dirty and scroungy, wearing stained overalls under an ill-fitting military vest. His scuffed-up, half-laced combat boots had to be size fifteens. Aya sat at his feet, and his ham-sized fist held a massive, bulky semi-automatic pistol, almost casually, against her head.

“Just relax, dude. You can take that off her head; nobody's going to risk dying over some spare parts.”

“I ask for your advice, chum?” the man asked in that same high-pitched voice Juliet had heard earlier. It was utterly incongruous with his appearance. “Pipe up again, and I might see if this new trigger's as light as advertised.” Juliet clenched her fists, looking more closely at Aya's face, seeing the fear in her eyes, and then at Bennet's and noting the blood on his chin beneath purple, swollen lips.

"This guy's going to pay for that," she growled into her helmet, stooping to check for a pulse on the one she'd pummeled. She could see from the purple malformation of his jaw that she'd broken it. She couldn't really tell if she felt a pulse, but apparently, Angel was better at noticing those sorts of things.

"He has a weak pulse. I don't think he'll wake up anytime soon. I'd bet good money that you gave him a serious concussion." Even so, Juliet didn't like leaving him unbound, so she snatched up a roll of electrical tape sitting atop a tool cart, then flopped him onto his stomach and wrapped a dozen layers around his wrists behind his back. With that done, she studied the feed once more, ensuring the gunman was still where she'd last seen him. Then she unplugged her cable and started creeping down the access corridor, pistol held ready.

When she reached the opening to the ship's galley, she continued to listen to the intruder bark threats at Bennet, though he and Aya had grown quiet, probably not wanting to provoke an irrational response from the bully. Ever so slowly, she inched her head past the hatchway until she could lay eyes on her target. If he were looking in her direction, he would have seen her; there wasn't much obstructing his view of the doorway, but he was busy looking down at Aya, gloating as he pushed the barrel of his gun against her head. "That bother you, sweetie? Don't like things poking you?"

Bennet, sitting on the floor beside the refrigerator, said, "Hey, listen, man, you rob us, that's one thing, but you do something worse, and you're going to regret it."

"Threatening me?" the man asked in his high-pitched, sort of wheezy voice. Juliet didn't listen to Bennet's response; she was staring at the guy's hand holding the pistol, focusing on his trigger finger. If he wasn't lying, if he had a lightweight trigger, it would be very dangerous for her to move against him while he held the barrel to Aya's head. It would be unless Juliet did something to neutralize that threat. Focusing on his thick, grease-stained digit, she slowly exhaled, visualizing her breath flowing out, wrapping around that finger and yanking it out and back, away from the trigger guard.

A wet pop sounded from the vicinity of the gun and Aya's head, and then the big, bald bulldozer of a man grunted in a high-pitched wheeze of surprise and lifted his hand, wide-eyed, looking with horror at his distended, dislocated pointer finger. He immediately looked down at Aya and cried, "You bitch!" His outburst sounded just a fraction of a second before Juliet cracked him on the back of his head with the butt of her Texan. She hit him hard enough, with her augmented arm, to kill most people, but his head was massive, and he had a thick layer of fat under his scalp, likely rendering the blow nonlethal. Still, he collapsed with a sigh, falling off the bench with a deck-shaking crash, rattling the dishes in the sink. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his breaths were short and jagged as he twitched.

"Just two of them?" Juliet asked her stunned, wide-eyed friends.

"Lucky!" Aya jumped to her feet.

"Shit, yes! Only two of the assholes. Where's the other guy?"

"Airlock," Juliet managed to grunt as Aya smashed into her, squeezing the air out of her lungs. Bennet grunted, standing, then pulled a thick roll of duct tape out of his overalls and got to work binding the huge, unconscious guy. Juliet squeezed Aya back with her unarmed hand and said,

“That van’s the same one that was cruising around when those other guys jumped us. This neighborhood’s terrible, Bennet.”

“Tell me about it—teach me to keep the bay door open for some fresh air. They aren’t a solo act, either. They were talking about a boss and another crew.”

“That’s right!” Aya pushed away from Juliet; her eyes were red, her cheeks flushed, and Juliet could tell she’d been crying. The thought of anyone being so cruel to Aya, who didn’t have a mean bone in her body, made her want to wake the guy up to beat him some more.

“Well, I’m done with this BS. Someone needs to clean this neighborhood up, and I guess I’m volunteering.” Her words brought a variety of reactions from everyone.

“Perhaps we should contact that corpo-sec Sergeant,” Angel said.

“Hell, yes,” Bennet grunted, standing up, red-faced, after leaning over to tape the giant’s wrists.

“Why don’t we just move?” Aya proposed. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt . . .”

“Nah, hush.” Juliet smiled and winked at Aya, twirling her pistol and holstering it. “Whatever operation’s running these crews is going to regret it. Besides, I think I can earn some points with Luna City Security with something like this. We don’t have anything illegal in the hangar, do we, Bennet? I might invite someone over to help me question these boys.”

“Illegal? Nah. I mean, once we get everything loaded up onto the gunship, we’re going to have to upgrade our operating license to be docked in Luna City, but right now, they’re all just perfectly legal parts or scrap, depending on who’s asking . . .” He kind of trailed off, shrugging.

“Don’t worry about it. The guy I’m talking about doesn’t exactly trust his department. I doubt he’ll want to give us any trouble.” While she spoke, Aya let go of her and knelt next to the big thug, looking at his hands where they were bound behind his back. Juliet saw the object of her focus: the purple, distended pointer finger of his right hand. “Let’s get you some air, huh, Aya? Bennet, can you drag this creep to the airlock with the other guy?”

“Yeah, sure . . .”

“Lucky?” Aya asked as she took Juliet’s offered hand.

“Yeah?”

“How’d you break that guy’s trigger finger before you clubbed him?”