

“So, your PAI set me up as the contact?” Bennet asked as he and Juliet stood on the corner, looking down the block toward the café. After leaving the ship, they’d gone to a guns and ammo store called Boyett’s Arms, where Juliet had just picked out some ammo for her new rifle when Angel had informed her that Lemur wanted to meet at 1230 rather than 1300. Figuring she’d need to purchase more equipment as she learned about Honey’s situation, Juliet had cut her shopping short and hurried to the café so they could set up ahead of Lemur.

“That’s right. Just sit at one of the tables near the espresso counter, and I’ll be lurking around looking at the antiques. Like I said, some of my specialized software takes a while to run, but once I get a look at the guy, I’ll get it started. I just need you to stall for a bit until I message you.”

“And then what?” Bennet nodded, lifting one of his bulky arms to rest a palm on the handle of the sturdy-looking semi-automatic he wore on his belt.

“Then, option one, I’ll tell you to cut ties. In that case, you’ll tell him you changed your mind and you’re heading off-moon. Alternatively, if my software checks him out okay, I’ll come join you at the table.” Juliet looked at Bennet, making sure he seemed steady. She felt a little bad getting him involved like this. Was he doing it simply because he thought he owed her, or was he trying to be a friend? In either case, she felt a little dirty for putting him in some danger, even if it was only an introductory meeting. He had a determined look, though, and nodded as if what she’d said made perfect sense.

“I’m good. Let’s do this, ‘cause I could use a good coffee. Do they sell any food?”

“Pastries, I think. Maybe some packaged sandwiches, I guess.” Juliet started walking as Bennet groused his reply.

“Oh, come on! How am I supposed to grow muscles off sugar?”

“Seriously?” Juliet laughed. “You eat enough protein supplements to bulk up an elephant.”

“You can laugh, but if you wanna get gains like this, you should be taking notes!”

Juliet didn’t respond; she just shook her head in disbelief and continued down the block. A couple of minutes later, they were crossing the light traffic to the opposite sidewalk and approaching the distinctive shop. When Juliet saw the front window with ancient paperback books on display, she suddenly remembered Commander Garza’s office and her collection of plastic-boxed fantasy and science fiction novels. At first, she smiled at the memory, but then she felt a surge of sadness when she realized they were probably buried in the corporate warehouse, no longer on display for Garza to enjoy, taking peace in whatever daydreams or special memories they’d given her. “Such a waste,” Juliet sighed, remembering Garza’s tough but friendly demeanor.

“What’s that?” Bennet asked, looking at the display. “Don’t like books?”

They were twenty minutes early, but Juliet didn’t want to show that she and Bennet were together, so she didn’t answer aloud. Instead, she pushed on the glass and plasteel door, stepped inside, and subvocalized into their comms, “Nah, I like books. I just had a bad memory when I saw them there. No worries.” Inside the door, she saw the shop was fairly spacious, with large, faux-wood, plastic bookshelves separating the antiques on the left from the café on the

right. Juliet turned into the book section and subvocalized, "I'll be over here, but I'll keep my eye on you."

"Cool," Bennet replied, taking her cue and subvocalizing.

Juliet noticed an unusual smell in the air. When she mentioned it to Angel, the PAI told her that, according to the net, books in large quantities had a unique odor—like a mixture of paper, glue, ink, dust, and all the other things accumulated on the pages over the years. Juliet wrinkled her nose at first, but she began to sort of like it as she browsed the shelves. Many of the books were in air-sealed plastic cases like Garza had used, but still more were bare, sitting on the shelves for her to pick up and inspect.

The store was mostly empty and very quiet, especially on the side with the books. Even better, Juliet could catch glimpses of the café and Bennet's table between bookcases, and, in her mind, her glances were very surreptitious. She started to reach for a book with the picture of a man with a funny hat and a big magnifying glass on the cover called *A Collection of Sherlock Holmes Adventures* when Angel said, "You're supposed to wear the provided gloves before handling the books."

"Oh?" Juliet jerked her hand back and looked toward the front of the store and saw the little display table with boxes of disposable microfiber gloves. She walked over to it, read the "STOP!" sign about protecting the books, and took a pair of gloves out of the box. "Thanks, Angel, that might have been embarrassing."

"You're welcome."

Juliet returned to the book displays, choosing a bookcase where she could occasionally glance to the right, seeing a clear view of Bennet's table between it and the next. He'd chosen a small one about halfway from the door to the rear of the café, with easy access to the coffee bar. He must have already ordered something because he was sitting with a blank expression on his face, clearly reading something on his AUI while he waited. Juliet turned to the bookcase, keeping Bennet in her peripheral vision so Angel could alert her if Lemur arrived. She'd also told Bennet to open his comms with her when he started speaking, so there was little chance she'd miss the operative's arrival.

Her hands now girded with soft, blue gloves, she reached for a book that grabbed her attention. It was a paperback depicting a mountain top built up with a sprawling, fanciful castle. The title was *The Great Book of Amber*, and she was surprised by its weight. "Zelazny?" she said softly, turning it this way and that, noticing the faded, slightly frayed condition of the cover and the spine but, overall, impressed by its good condition. "This thing's ninety-eight years old. Pretty crazy. What do they want for it, Angel?"

"The store's sales inventory lists that book at 842 Sol-bits."

"Wow," Juliet said, gently opening the cover and turning to the first page of print. She started to read, figuring it was a good excuse for standing where she was, and she'd become rather engrossed in Zelazny's flowing prose when she heard Bennet speak. She kept her eyes on the book, but Angel cropped a square out of her peripheral vision and displayed it in her line of sight, showing the table clearly.

“Hey, good to meet you,” Bennet said, standing halfway to offer the man across the table from him a handshake.

The man, an average-sized fellow wearing jeans, a loose navy sweater, and comfortable-looking jogging shoes, took his hand and replied, “Likewise. Lemur’s my handle, and my PAI says you’re Lucky, huh?” His voice was a little nasally but otherwise pleasant, and though Juliet couldn’t see his face, she could see his brown hair was cut into a very ordinary, close-cropped style, parted on the left side. Everything about him seemed quite nondescript.

Angel had spoofed Bennet’s PAI to respond to pings with Juliet’s operator ID temporarily, so it wasn’t surprising that Lemur assumed Bennet was her. Still, Bennet faltered a little, his face twisting oddly as he fought to maintain his neutral expression. He covered by sitting and taking a drink of his coffee and then said, “Anyway, thanks for meeting me here. The ship I arrived on had a pretty bad excuse for coffee.”

“Oh, spacers and their coffee, huh? Seems like every crew has a different idea of what’s good, and then there are those that don’t seem to care at all, just happy for a bit of bitter caffeine.”

“Yeah, I think this ship might have had a budget issue,” Bennet chuckled. While he spoke, Juliet stared at the side of Lemur’s head, taking in his slightly receding hairline, his long earlobe, and then the corner of his eye. She wished she could see into those eyes; it seemed to make activating the lattice a lot easier. Still, she memorized that image and then subvocalized, “Block my vision and my ears, Angel.”

As the world grew dark and quiet, Juliet continued to hold the book in front of her face and then imagined that memorized image of Lemur. She stared at the visualization, willing herself to bore through that pale temple to see what was in the brain within. She fought back a grin when she heard his voice in her head, knowing her ears were offline.

*Something’s up with this guy. Am I being set up? No, no way. I was careful. Gianna wouldn’t do me like that; we’ve been through too much. Still, this guy seems way off.*

The words continued to flow, and Juliet had the feeling she was hearing his words as he thought of them, perhaps as he said them, but maybe before. She had no way of knowing unless she turned her ears back on, and she didn’t want to lose her connection. *That’s right. Mmhmm, but I’m not sure I’m comfortable relaying everything I have right now. Yeah, she paid my investigation fee, but I’m feeling kind of exposed. Some hazard pay would go a long way, yeah.*

Again, the voice changed slightly, and Juliet thought it sounded like she was hearing an internal dialogue again—Lemur thinking to himself. *Something’s hinky here. This guy’s like a bulldog, no finesse. Damn it, and he knows my handle. Time for a false trail. Send this guy hunting around some empty warehouses while I jump moons. That gig near Europa is sounding better and better.*

“Turn me back on,” Juliet subvocalized. Her vision came back, and so did her ears, in time to hear Bennet chuckling.

“That’s nice of you!” He wore a huge smile and was nodding his head eagerly. “Oh yeah, I spend a lot of downtime taking care of my body; it’s the only one I’ve got, you know? I can’t believe I’m going to eat this donut.”

“Oh, brother,” Juliet breathed, closing the book but keeping it in her gloved hand. She walked between the bookcases, around the barista’s counter, and approached the table. Lemur was chuckling, saying something about how much New Atlas had grown in the last decade, when she stopped by the table, smiling pleasantly.

“Hey, uh, miss,” Bennet said, scooting his chair back a couple of inches to look more fully at her. Lemur looked up, and his eyes narrowed, then a grin spread on his face.

“Lucky?” he asked.

Juliet’s lips quirked up, and she offered him a short nod, set the thick, heavy book on the table, and asked, “May I sit?”

“Sure, sure,” Lemur said, visibly relaxing. Bennet hadn’t responded to the man’s quick uptake on the change of roles, but he shrugged, lifted his pink-glazed donut, and took a bite. Juliet pulled out the chair between the two men and sat down, her back to the counter.

“Sorry for the subterfuge; I’ve been dealing with dangerous people, and I wanted to get a good look at you before I showed myself.” She touched the deck hanging from her neck and said, “Mind if I activate a jammer and noise field?”

He shrugged, “Probably wise.”

Juliet could feel it when Angel carried out her request—a slight whine in her ears that took Angel two or three seconds to tune out; then she smiled and, glancing at the table with the book, Bennet’s coffee, and plate, she said, “Bennet, please don’t spill on the book; I haven’t paid for it.”

“Jesus,” he mumbled, swallowing his bite, “That thing’s eight-hundred bits.”

“I know, I know.” Juliet shrugged, then turned to Lemur and said, “Again, I’m sorry for the little deception.”

“I feel a lot better seeing you’re cautious, to be honest.”

“So, I know you’ve already made some small and not-so-small talk with Bennet. Do you mind if I get right into the meat?”

“Yeah, let me start. Are you certain the target has no idea you’re here? My client told me her friend hired you verbally and that you’ve had no contact that would give you away. This is true? Please don’t lie because I’m very good at spotting deception, and I’d take it personally.”

“That’s accurate. I have a contract with my client, but it hasn’t gone to the SOA net yet. I’m holding it to keep all traces of this operation off the books. I received a single, one-way communication from my target, but that was weeks ago and sent to a now-defunct address. Unless my client sold me out, which isn’t likely, there’s no way anyone is aware of my interest in your surveillance target.”

“Perfect. I like your avoidance of using my surveillance target’s name. Let’s keep it that way. I didn’t get eyes on your objective, but I have some tangential information that paints a certain picture. Would you like me to expound?”

Bennet made a grunting sound, stuffing the last of his donut into his mouth, squinting his eyes quizzically. Juliet got the impression that he wasn't used to people talking around a subject so purposefully. She winked at him and said to Lemur, "Please do."

"Well, my target owns a lot of property on Titan, not just here in New Atlas but also in a few of the industrial and agricultural domes. About a month ago, he had a new house built in the Xanadu Dome—an agricultural and recreational dome complete with mountains and forests. Forty percent of the area is reserved for public recreation, forty for agricultural uses, and the final twenty is owned by less than a dozen high-wealth, high-influence individuals."

"Mmhmm, so a new residence. Anything else . . . tangential?"

"Yeah, I spoke to some contractors. They said it was designed like it was made to keep someone in just as much as to keep people out. Two-way security panels, cameras pointing in as well as out, proximity sensors, and security checkpoints searching vehicles coming and going. You get the idea."

"Sounds promising." Juliet offered a small smile while she drummed her fingers on the table. The timeframe fit and all the things Lemur was telling her sounded promising, but she wished he had something more concrete, some proof that Honey and Misha were being kept there. "Nothing else?"

"Oh, I'm not done. I've got some more tidbits for you, but first, can we talk business?" He folded his hands on the table and smiled warmly, and Juliet gave him a good look. He seemed so unassuming, so normal; she couldn't see a hint of any visible cybernetics on him, which she supposed could be considered notable in itself. His eyes were a pale brown, his face was oval, a little soft, but not pudgy, and she couldn't imagine him being responsible for "high-value target eliminations."

"I heard you and Bennet talking money. Didn't your client pay you already?"

"Sure. I've delivered enough, I think, to satisfy my contract with her. Are you interested in continuing my employment?"

"What's it going to cost me?" Juliet frowned, annoyed that he'd probably saved the best information for leverage.

"Well, first, let me tell you what I've got—an eyewitness describing the new villa's guests and a partially developed cover that might allow the right person or people to get inside. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in?"

"You know the answer," Juliet said, her voice flat. "Now drop the other shoe. What's your fee?"

Bennet cleared his throat, scooting his chair back and glancing at the counter. Before Lemur could answer, he said, "Uh, maybe hold that thought. I ordered another donut and a refill, and I see them getting ready to bring it over."

"Seriously?" Juliet sighed and turned toward the counter. Sure enough, one of the baristas was walking toward them with a plate and a steaming cup. She was young, wearing very pale, nearly

white makeup, and her head was adorned with a wild hair mod—chrome spikes all over her pale scalp, black hair hanging out of the tips like braided tassels.

“Donut?” she asked, and Bennet sheepishly held up his hand. “Here you go, big guy,” she said, moving behind Juliet and standing far closer to Bennet than necessary to set his plate down. “Coffee for you, too?”

“Yep,” he nodded. Juliet glanced at Lemur and saw him sitting back with an amused expression. Seeing that, Juliet felt more at ease and leaned back, perhaps subconsciously mimicking his posture.

“Here,” the barista said, setting the cup down. “Be careful! It’s very hot.” Bennet nodded and smiled at her, then the young woman looked at Juliet’s book, tracked her eyes to her gloved hands, and said, “You gonna buy that?”

“Maybe,” Juliet shrugged.

“You get one crumb or drop of coffee on it, and it’s yours.” She jerked her head at the camera in the corner. “We’ve got your ID.”

“Relax,” Juliet said, delivering her best death stare. “I’m good.”

The barista frowned at her, stared for another second, then sauntered away.

“Touchy,” Lemur said.

“Yeah. I’m probably going to buy this book now, out of spite, if nothing else.” Juliet smiled, squinting her eyes and shrugging self-deprecatingly.

“Anyway,” Lemur said, leaning closer to Juliet, “My fee—If you just want the information and contacts I have, I’d like twenty percent of your contracted fee with your client. I’ll be happy with verbal assurances if you don’t want me to know your client’s name.”

“I’m listening,” Juliet said, waiting for the rest of his spiel.

“If you want my help with the rest of your mission, which, I assume, is some sort of extraction, I’m looking for twice that amount.”

“How about I promise you the twenty percent, and if you end up helping beyond just supplying information, we can negotiate the rest at that point.”

“So long as we’re clear that the reason I’m willing to take a verbal agreement with you is that I’m very confident in my ability to extract payment from those who cheat me.” He spoke so naturally, his face so pleasant, that Juliet might not have realized he was threatening her if she hadn’t paid attention to his words.

She matched his pleasant, neutral expression and replied in kind, “I feel the same way, Mr. Lemur. I feel the same way.” She looked at Bennet, who was frowning at his half-eaten second donut. “Let’s hear what you’ve got so my friend can go home and sweat out all that sugar, and I can pay for this overpriced relic.” She chuckled, drumming the gloved fingers of her plasteel hand on the top of the thick book.