

“What did you fuckin’ say?” Bennet asked as Juliet whirled, recognizing the voice of the thug who’d run away the night before.

“Shut up, ship-boy,” the man said, striding forward, flanked by two friends, all wearing the same insignia sewn into their jackets that Juliet had noticed before, the snarling hyena with chromed teeth. In the daylight, the big man wasn’t any prettier or friendlier. He had buzzed hair atop a bulbous head resting on an absurdly thick neck that seemed to spread outward into shoulders bunched with muscle. He was a good six inches taller than Bennet, and his gigantic plasteel left hand looked like it could crush the front end of a small passenger vehicle. Purple light blazed from the brilliant, square LEDs that lurked where his eyeballs should be, and his chromed lower jaw was fixed in a perpetual snarl, the metallic lower lip not quite matching up with the fleshy top one.

“Come a little closer and say that, you shit-eating scrap brain!” Bennet shoved past Juliet, and she felt her heart begin to hammer; she knew these guys played for keeps. As her mind raced and she tried to think of the best move, the cab sped away, and she glanced up and down the sidewalk, wondering if any help was at hand. Of course, she didn’t see any corpo-sec nearby—they’d never been around when she or her friends needed them in Tucson, either—and the people walking up and down the sidewalk hurried their steps, avoiding her glances, demonstrating their practiced ease when it came to skirting this sort of trouble.

The two men with Chromejaw were both a good bit smaller and sported a lot less hardware, but they didn’t look friendly, and one of them gripped the handle of a baton, the collapsible kind, jutting out of his front pocket. Juliet frowned, not seeing any firearms on display; was it because it was daytime? Were they worried about the scanners near the docks? She stopped speculating because she knew they could very well have any number of guns hidden under their coats or built into their bodies.

The man on Chromejaw’s left had open sores on his shaved head, red plasteel teeth, and only scars where his ears should be. The other accomplice looked almost normal, like a guy Juliet might have seen at a bar back home—average build, black hair, and a bushy mustache that seemed from a different era. Even with the mustache, he looked almost handsome. He stepped to the right, trying to move around to Bennet’s side or perhaps to get a better angle on Juliet.

Juliet’s brain had been moving a million miles a minute, and when she opened her mouth to speak, Bennet was just starting to square off with Chromejaw. “Hold up, Bennet. I know this asshole, and he’s got warrants. I’m putting a call into corpo-sec.”

“You know this guy?” Bennet asked.

“Corpos can’t save you, ship rats!” Chromejaw grunted, driving that massive, gray metallic fist forward, but Bennet was no slouch. He slipped the punch and delivered a devastating jab to the big thug’s ribs, pivoting around him and slamming his shoulder into No-ears, sending him sprawling backward onto his butt. Juliet knew Bennet was tough, like a boulder wearing clothes, but she was still surprised to see Chromejaw double over, falling to one knee. Had Bennet broken his ribs?

She didn’t have time to wonder for long; Handsome snapped out the full length of his baton and whipped it at the side of Bennet’s head. The engineer was totally exposed, having committed a bit too much as he slammed into No-ears, but Juliet’s reflexes wouldn’t let her stand idle. She dropped her shopping bag and lunged forward, surprising herself at how easily the muscle

memories from her time in the dojo came to life. Even as she forgot her arm was plasteel, she swung it around to grab the baton. She caught the whistling length of hardened steel, and the synthetic nerves in her hand told her it should have hurt, sending a jolting tingle all the way to her shoulder.

Still, the warning was just that, a warning. It didn't really hurt, and Juliet grasped the baton, wrenching it with all her might, ripping it from Handsome's grasp. Then she turned it on him, cracking it against his knee so hard that it swept his leg, and he fell to the concrete rolling and groaning in agony. Something had broken in the joint; Juliet felt it as the baton crunched home. Handsome seemed out of it with pain, but, as she liked to do, Juliet planted a heavy work boot into the small of his back, driving him to the concrete, and then she stood on him and watched Bennet choking Chromejaw into submission.

No-ears scrambled to his feet and started sprinting away, but Juliet hefted the baton and tossed it at his head like she would a knife. It wasn't really a conscious act, more a reflex. Had she thought about it, she'd like to think she wouldn't have done it; the baton had to weigh a couple of pounds and was hard, tempered steel. Still, she couldn't take it back, and the length of tempered steel cracked into the crown of his head. Maybe the thug was lucky, though, because the hardened ball at the end of the baton would have done a lot more damage. Still, it was enough; he collapsed, sliding along the pavement on his cheek, leaving a bit of a red smear.

Bennet had Chromejaw on the pavement, face down, and was kneeling on the center of his back. "Damn. Nice throw!" he grunted.

Handsome was bucking and shoving at the ground, trying to stand up and throw Juliet off, so she drew her needler and said, "I'm going to start shooting you if you keep moving," shifting to the side just enough so he could glance up and see the weapon.

"Damn it, I told Wart we should bring guns," he whined, collapsing back to his chest, defeat written in his expression and limp form.

"Wart?" Bennet snorted. "What are you guys, some kind of gang? The, uh, Rabid Badgers or something?" He slapped the big hyena on the back of Chromejaw's jacket.

"Well done, Juliet," Angel said. "I knew you had things handled. By the way, New Atlas corpo-sec estimates a response vehicle will be here within the hour."

"What the hell? Corpo-sec's maybe an hour out." Juliet looked up and down the street; plenty of people were out and about, but they still pointedly avoided looking at her, and everyone was giving their section of the sidewalk a wide berth.

"Of course, they are," Handsome said, groaning as Juliet shifted her weight on his back.

"What do you mean? They were on me in minutes last night when that big goon started shooting."

"Guess you got lucky."

"What's your name, dipshit?" Bennet asked, grunting as he shifted Chromejaw to his side and began to jerk his big, metal-studded belt off him.

“Call me Lance,” Juliet’s prisoner groaned, trying to shift under her boot to probe his knee with his right hand. “Dammit, I think you broke it!”

“Why’d you leave your guns at home, Lance?” Bennet asked, ignoring his whimpering.

“We were poking around in the port, looking for this bi . . . Ow!” he cried as Juliet drove her heel into his spine.

“Try again,” Juliet said through a clenched jaw. “More politely.”

“Wart knows someone in dock security. She scanned the feeds last night for this, uh, lady,” he jerked his thumb toward Juliet, “and told us where to wait for you. We were heading into the docking tunnel, so, yeah, Wart said to leave our guns. You know, ‘cause we all have warrants and no licenses. We didn’t want to set off any alarms.”

“Brilliant. You didn’t think your warrants might set off an alarm?” Bennet laughed as he wrapped the studded strip of leather around Chromejaw’s wrists. The bulky man’s arms didn’t bend enough to bind them behind his back, but Bennet made it work, leaving ten inches or so of leather between them. “Just enough to keep him from going ape when he wakes up.”

“I believe the big man is awake,” Angel said into Juliet’s ear. “He seems to be feigning unconsciousness.”

“Watch out, Bennet!” Juliet said. “He’s not sleeping.”

“Oh? I can fix that!” Bennet growled, driving his knee into the big chromed-out thug’s lower back and leaning close to his ear. “Make a move, and I’ll punch you so hard in the kidney you’ll have to piss out one of my rings.” Chromejaw groaned and shifted slightly, but he didn’t say anything. Juliet smiled, finding the line particularly amusing because Bennet’s fingers were bare.

“Which one of you guys is Wart, by the way?” Juliet asked, nudging Lance with her boot.

“The big guy,” he grunted.

“Angel, keep an eye on my visual feed; I don’t want to get blindsided.” Juliet scanned the sidewalk again, taking in all the pedestrians, frowning at anyone who met her eye but didn’t come forward to help.

“I’m on high alert!” As if to prove it, Angel began highlighting people in various colors, displaying their ping status: green for those who responded with a name and yellow for those who refused the query. Juliet supposed that if she identified any known criminals, she’d highlight them in red.

“Is that guy dead?” Juliet asked, staring at the runner she’d cracked with the baton.

“I don’t know.” Bennet shrugged.

“He’s not,” Angel replied, turning on Juliet’s thermal filter, showing her the man’s body was a steady thirty-seven degrees Celsius.

“You guys are idiots. You know that?” Bennet asked his captive.

“You fucked with the wrong guys . . . oof!” Wart’s threat was cut short by Bennet leaning his entire weight into his knee, pressing down on the bulky man’s kidney.

“Quiet. I don’t need to hear about how tough the Badgers are.”

“Jackals!” the big man wheezed.

“Hang on,” Juliet said. “I have an idea.” Then she subvocalized, “Can you call that corpo-sec guy from last night? He gave us his contact info, right?”

Two seconds later, a call window appeared in her AUI, and on the third ring tone, Officer Fitzpatrick’s face appeared. His background was blurred, but he didn’t have his corpo-sec helmet and visor on, so Juliet didn’t think he was at work. His eyes surprised her, designer irises that rotated counterclockwise, running through alternating rainbow patterns. “Hey, Lucky. Nice of you to reach out. What’s up? Looking for a tour guide?”

“Oh, hey, um, Officer Fitzpatrick. Sorry, but no, this isn’t a social call.”

“Yeah? You in trouble?” His eyes narrowed, and Juliet thought his concern seemed sincere.

“Not yet, but my friend and I are kind of hanging in the breeze, waiting for a patrol. Three of those gang rats jumped us by the docks, and we beat them down, but, yeah, we’re kind of exposed, and it’s going to get ugly if any of their buddies show up.”

“Send me your location, and I’ll call one of the guys on duty, tell them to prioritize your call. Keep your head on a swivel ‘cause those creeps are like maggots in a piece of old meat; they just keep coming.”

“Lovely image. Thanks, Officer . . .”

“Barry,” he said. “Call me Barry.”

“Right. Thanks, Barry.”

“No problem, but, hey, try calling me for something a little more fun next time.” He winked at her then the connection was severed.

“Flirting with the cops?” Bennet chuckled. “Hey, don’t glare at me! It’s cool. I mean, whatever works, right?”

Whatever Barry said to his friends on duty must have worked because a corpo-sec patrol cruiser pulled up to the curb only three minutes later. Juliet heard the telltale buzzing of drone blades high above as the officer stepped out. She glanced up, but, in her narrow window of visible sky, quite a few vehicles filled the air, from tourist dirigibles to delivery drones to, probably, corpo-sec drones. She couldn’t tell which one she’d heard buzzing close.

The corpo-sec officer asked everyone to share their vid files of the incident. The thugs refused, but Juliet and Bennet complied, and a few minutes later, he cleared them of wrongdoing. He loaded up the three bangers, stuffing them into the back of his cruiser, and, brushing his black-gloved hands together as though he’d just loaded up the trash, drove away. He never gave them his name but sent an incident report to Angel and Bennet’s PAI before his cruiser passed

through the traffic light at the corner. “He wasn’t nearly as friendly as Officer Fitzpatrick,” Juliet said, turning back toward the docks, stooping to pick up her plastic bag.

“Well, those idiots know what docking corridor you’re using now. If they have communication with their gang, you might get jumped again. Might just get shot next time before you even see it coming.”

“Lovely thought.” Juliet sighed, shrugging. “What can I do? I’ll be careful.”

“I mean, can you change your looks a little? This corridor serves, what, twelve different docking collars? I’m assuming you have your PAI set to refuse random ID queries, right?”

“Yeah, but I can be a little trickier than that, too. I’ll be okay, Bennet, thanks.” Juliet clapped him on the shoulder and added, “Damn, but you hit that guy hard. What did you do, shatter his ribs?”

“Perhaps we should investigate the dock security personnel. I bet we could figure out who sold your location to Wart and his friends,” Angel added.

Bennet didn’t hear Angel, so he spoke at almost the same time, answering Juliet, “I think it was worse than that! I really meant to hit him in the ribs, but my fist kinda went into his gut underneath them. I bet I ruptured something important ‘cause it took the fight right out of him.” He seemed almost embarrassed, apologetic, shrugging sheepishly.

“I know you’re strong, but you threw that punch like you knew what you were doing. Slipped his haymaker too.”

“Well, I used to box. Local gym in the arcology where I grew up, down in Memphis. You been?”

“No,” Juliet shook her head. “Wasn’t it pretty much wasted during the war? I thought it was mostly ABZ these days.” They’d taken the second turn in the docking corridor and were on the long last stretch toward the *Kowashi’s* airlock.

“Uh, yeah, mostly. Couple of big corps there still. Lots of money to be made digging up wrecks from the big coalition offensive back in ’59. You know they lost something like ten thousand tanks and half that many advanced fighters? A lot of nice alloys lying around in the rubble. Cybergen just kept throwing swarms at ‘em. My dad used to tell me all kinds of stories about the things his crew would dig up—chromed synths with canons for arms, puddles that glowed in the dark, and if you held a piece of scrap out toward them, the bugs would pile on top of each other to get to it, pulling it in. Shit like that.”

“Bugs?”

“You know, nanites. The ones that lost their connection to the AI handling ‘em.”

Juliet tried to picture a wasted cityscape with advanced military vehicles, synths, and corpses clutching lost-tech buried under the rubble, people digging for them like some kind of macabre gold rush. “Creepy stuff. Why’d you move, though?”

“Dad died on the job. Something fell on him. Mom married a guy who liked to kick the crap outta me.” He shrugged. “I hitched a ride down to Houston and never looked back when I got a job on a wrecker going to lo.”

“Io?” Juliet sighed wistfully as Bennet punched in the airlock code. “I want to see the Jovian System. I heard Athena helped design some of the structures on Io back before they took her offline.”

The door hissed open, and they stepped into the airlock. “You’re not wrong; There’s a tree on Io, halfway up the slope of Amirani, that looks like something out of a fantasy vid. It’s, like, half a klick tall with white bark and branches that hang out over the buildings inside the dome there.”

“Seriously? She created a living tree?” The airlock hissed as it equalized the pressure, and the inner door opened. “By the way, speaking of wrecks, the *Bumble* could at least equalize its pressure with the station!”

“Hey, don’t insult this old girl,” Bennet said, reaching out to pat the dingy plasteel in the corridor. “I’m still trying to figure out what damn sensor is out of whack, that’s all. Anyway, yeah, the tree . . . I don’t know if it’s alive, but it will damn well make your jaw drop when you see it.” He paused and rubbed at his chin, “Hey, don’t ruin it for yourself, all right? Don’t look up any vids or photos of it. It’s best seen in person, trust me.”

“Okay.” Her response didn’t seem to convince him because he frowned and locked eyes with her, so she tried again, “Seriously, I won’t. After I saw Saturn up close, vids and holograms will never work again. I guess there’s always VR . . .”

“Don’t you dare!” Bennet smiled and said, “Hey, I forgot to message Shiro and them. I mean, your friends kinda distracted me.”

“My friends!” Juliet groaned. “Well, message them! I’m taking a shower.” She held out a fist, and when Bennet’s brick-like knuckles bounced into it, she said, “Can you show me some boxing stuff when we work out?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” He nodded, though his face looked a little unsure, as though he’d almost said no. “We can do that. Shit! I don’t have a clue what gym to go to. Let’s do some research while we’re changing and compare notes. I’m heading down to engineering to check a couple of things. Meet you in, like, twenty?”

“Roger,” Juliet said, turning on her heel and walking toward the lift. As they parted ways and she heard his footsteps echoing away, she said, “Were you serious about digging out that gang’s contact in dock security?”

She climbed onto the lift, punched the up arrow, and Angel responded, “It might be wise to get a handle on security leaks if we’re going to be operating out of the ship here for a week or more.”

“Or we could just get a hotel in the city.” Juliet stepped off the lift and started toward her cabin.

“True, but you’re, ostensibly, still supposed to be providing security for the *Kowashi*.”

“Right.” Juliet frowned, her mind spinning through ideas. “Let’s change my hair. Start it toward blonde again, will you? I’ll go out with the crew tonight, but tomorrow I want to spend a little time down by the main dock security station. You know, do a little *listening*.”

“I’ve begun the process. What about your eyes?”

“Something different . . .”

“We could do something more reflective rather than backlit. Something like the chromed irises you took on to impersonate Chaudhry, but perhaps a different color.”

“Like what? A shiny blue or green?” Juliet’s cabin door slid open, and she stepped inside. She emptied her shopping bag onto her dresser, setting the rifle flechettes next to her big, plastic-encased book. She frowned for a second, then lifted the book so it sat on its bottom edge, the colorful cover facing outward.

“Certainly,” Angel replied while Juliet stared at the book, marveling at the idea of it—all that tiny text neatly crammed into the pages, waiting for someone’s eyes to fall upon the words, creating a story, people, images, conversations, inside their head. “We could do blue, green, another metallic color . . .”

“Amber,” Juliet said, looking again at the book title. “Let’s do amber eyes this time.”