

Still reeling from the sudden turn of events, Juliet staggered back against the elevator wall, digging her plasteel hand into the big pocket of her overalls, fumbling for the handle of the pistol Lemur had handed her. The damn thing was upside down, having turned in the voluminous pouch. While part of her fumbled, part of her railed at herself for being so caught off guard. Somehow, she'd built Lemur up into a bogeyman in her mind, and the idea that he'd been so suddenly . . . dispatched had thrown her for a loop. She kept her eyes glued to the opening elevator door, watching as the man who'd killed Lemur was revealed, and she desperately pawed at the gun, clumsily rotating it to grasp the grip properly.

The security officer who stood in the elevator doorway looked much like the others she'd seen. Maybe his suit was cut a little better, tailored more expertly, and made of better material. She wasn't an expert on men's suits, but it looked good. He wore the gray suit jacket open and had a white dress shirt beneath, buttoned to the top, but no tie. He was average height, had short dark hair, chromed eyes with red LED irises, and tattoos that stretched from his shirt collar to his jaw onto his clean-shaven face. They were colorful, blue, red, black, and green tattoos, depicting all sorts of things from Japanese kanji to a beautiful woman's face to teardrops at the corner of his left eye.

Only his left hand was gloved. The other held the handle of a long, straight sword with a single-edged blade. It was slender and lethal-looking, the shiny metallic surface glimmering with hypnotic red patterned light that limned the edge in thousands of tiny red starbursts. When he locked eyes with her, Juliet let go of the gun; something told her she would suffer Lemur's fate if she tried to lift it to fire. Angel helped to solidify that viewpoint when she said, "That's a monofilament blade, Juliet. A holographic projector mounted in the hilt creates the lighting effect, tracing the edge because it's too fine to see. His body temperature is elevated; I believe he's heavily augmented."

"Come out," he growled, touching something outside the elevator, apparently locking the door open.

Juliet lifted her hands, holding them open, palms out. Despite her desire to flee, she knew there was nowhere she could go. The man backed up a step, and as Juliet crossed the threshold, he turned over his shoulder and barked, "Back up. Be still!" Juliet stepped over Lemur's feet, glancing left and right. The corridor continued in both directions for about five meters before ending in corners. The woman, sobbing, face tear-streaked, glasses clutched in one hand, was on the ground, scooting away from Lemur's corpse and the deadly, sword-wielding man.

"I don't think . . ." Juliet started, not really sure what she was going to say, but he cut her off.

"I'll have your words, but they'll be the truth." With a flourish, he nimbly lifted his sword and sheathed it, sliding it home in a plain black scabbard that hung on his left hip. Then, faster than Juliet could register, he stepped forward and slapped her so hard that her ears rang, and she stumbled over Lemur's corpse, crashing into the plain, white-painted concrete wall. The blow had stung, had rattled her, but it hadn't *really* hurt. He wasn't trying to beat her up or kill her; he was trying to punish and humiliate her.

"I couldn't even see it . . ." she started to subvocalize as she steadied herself against the wall, trying to straighten up. However, she didn't finish the thought because the tattooed man darted forward and smashed a fist into her kidney. That time, it hurt. It hurt so badly that Juliet cried out and fell back on her butt, her hands sprawling out to catch her and slipping in the pool of

Lemur's blood. As pain radiated through her side, she tried to catch the wind that had been knocked out of her, gasping as unwanted tears began to fill her eyes.

The man stood there, looming over her in the hallway, and Juliet lashed out with her foot, trying to remember what she'd learned about fighting from the ground when knocked down. She was sure she was about to kick him in the knee with the sole of her boot, hopefully breaking it but at least hurting him badly. Her foot touched nothing but air, though, and then he was behind her, grabbing her hair and dragging her back through the blood.

"Juliet, he's augmented for speed. He's as fast as Jensen."

"Jesus," Juliet gasped, unable to subvocalize in her pain and distress. "He was this fast?"

"He *is* this fast!" the man growled, clearly misunderstanding her.

"I can't even see him move."

"The whole level is jammed. Who are you trying to talk to?" he asked, and then, when Juliet kept struggling, pulling away, trying to get her hair out of his hands, he threw her, using her braids as handles. She cried out, sure he'd ripped some of the strands loose, thankful her scalp was synthetic and that the pain-sensing nerves were dulled.

As she tumbled over the hard tiled floor, Angel spoke to her. "You *can* see him move! Your eyes are fast enough. It's your brain—you aren't wired for speed the way he is. He has processors and synthetic synapses augmenting him. I can do it, Juliet, but you have to give me permission. Let me help you process his movements."

"Do it." Juliet wiped her face with her sleeve as she struggled to her hands and knees. At some point, she'd started bleeding from her forehead. Had she cracked it on the wall? The floor? The man was still standing by Lemur's corpse. Staring at her, a one-sided grin turned up a corner of his thin, severe lips.

"Do it? I'm not ready to kill you yet. We'll have some fun. You'll spill your life story, then, maybe I'll 'do it.'"

Juliet reached into her pocket and found the gun had fallen out while she'd tumbled around, but her fingers touched her knife. She started to pull it out, and then the world slowed down. She saw the man dart toward her, running at what seemed like a normal speed, lifting his fist. She jerked her arm up, but it moved impossibly slowly, like she was caught in a nightmare where her body moved in slow motion. She'd barely cleared her fist of the pocket's fabric when his fist impacted her stomach, driving into her before she could even reflexively tighten her abdominal muscles.

Juliet cried out, her breath exploding behind the vocalization, and staggered back and to the side, barely catching a shoulder on the wall to keep herself from collapsing to the floor again. She leaned against the cold concrete, mouth open, trying to breathe but unable to get her lungs to respond. "Standby," Angel said. "Directing your nanites to deliver oxygen to your brain. Don't panic, Juliet! You have plenty of oxygen. Stop thinking about breathing! Use the distraction to set up an attack. You're too slow to hit him, but I can overdrive your cybernetic arm for one shot! One stab! Get ready!"

Juliet continued to lean there, mouth agape, stomach convulsing, trying to take a breath. She told herself her diaphragm was spasming; it would recover. She told herself she had enough oxygen for her body to operate for minutes and, with her nanites, for her brain to last an hour. She told herself those things, but her body still wanted to gasp; she still wanted to panic and run. With an effort of will, she clamped down on that panic and watched him approach. She leaned against the wall with her arm hanging behind her leg, the vibroblade clenched in the metallic fist.

The tattooed man reached down with his ungloved hand and roughly rubbed his thumb along her cheek, wiping at the tears streaming out of her watering eyes. “Bit off more than you could chew, hmm?” His tone was mockingly sweet, but even then, it had a hard edge to it. He stood over her, one hand resting on the wall so his gray jacket hung open. While Juliet continued to gasp, she looked up at him and saw a neon yellow bullseye on his white dress shirt, about ten centimeters down from his armpit.

Trusting Angel to be ready, Juliet touched the button on her hidden knife, turning the vibroblade on. Her heart burst into motion, her muscles clenched, and her pupils dilated—Angel had dumped adrenaline into her blood. Juliet twisted at the hips and swung her cybernetic arm as hard as she could, driving the point of that buzzing instrument of death right toward Angel’s bullseye. He felt or saw her move, and, with the speed of a hummingbird, the deadly swordsman started to pull away, but then Angel dumped her arm’s battery, frying the electronics, and sending it into an explosion of movement far beyond its factory specifications.

It was like the arm had been strapped to a rocket. Her wrist and elbow snapped into a driving lance, and, with the vibroblade leading the way, she drove it into her assailant’s chest cavity. The blade surely pierced his heart, but her fist followed, shattering ribs and pulverizing a lung on its way. For a moment, Juliet felt blinding agony in her shoulder and upper back, but Angel must have had the nanites ready—they blocked the pain almost immediately. She stood there, heaving, finally able to breathe, leaning over his fast-cooling corpse.

Juliet’s eyes saw pinpricks in a red tunnel, and she could hear her heart pounding like a hammer drum in her ears. Gasping, choking on her huge, welcome inhalations, she tried to pull her arm back. It was wedged in the man’s ribs. Juliet had to use a boot to hold his body down while she wrenched her arm to pull it out. Her gore-covered fist still clenched her vibroblade, and Juliet couldn’t make it let go. She couldn’t make her arm do anything—it was fried. Thanks to her nanites and Angel’s swift management of them, she was able to function, and she had to use that advantage. She had to *move*.

Juliet looked up the hallway, saw the pretty woman in the lab coat scrabbling to get up, and said, “Stay put. I don’t want to have to hurt you.” Juliet stumbled toward her gun, then glanced down at the corpse before her. She’d never seen a monoblade in person, but she knew they were rare. She knew they were incredibly expensive. She took a few seconds and awkwardly worked to unfasten his belt and slide the sheath off. Holding it in her working left hand, she stalked toward the elevator. Smearred in blood, smoke drifting up from her burnt-out arm, she glowered at the woman still sitting on the floor. “Get up.”

“Please. I don’t have anything . . .”

“I won’t hurt you if you do what I ask. I’m not like him.” She gestured to Lemur. Then her eyes fell on the tattooed man. “Them.” As the woman, wiping at her face, clambered to her feet, Juliet

glanced at the stuck-open elevator and asked, "Can that be overridden from upstairs? The lock this guy put on it?"

"No, it's a physical lock. See his key in the panel?" Juliet looked, and sure enough, a small chrome key protruded from the top of the elevator control panel. "Are there more like him down here?"

"He's the only security officer allowed on this level. He *lives* here."

"You're going to need her," Angel said. "The man wasn't lying. I've lost my wireless connection to the network. I can't see the cameras any longer. Should we flee, Juliet? Should we go up the elevator and get out of here?"

Juliet didn't answer immediately. She wanted to think first, so she said, "Well, come on. Take me to where you're holding the young woman and little girl. You know who I mean?"

"Yes. There's only one little girl here. We don't hurt them! I'm just a researcher. I didn't have anything to do with . . ."

"Quiet. I already told you I'm not going to hurt you." Juliet looked around, frowning. She reached up, sword still in her hand, and awkwardly pulled at the zipper of her jumper. When she'd gotten it halfway down, she slipped the sheath inside, down her side, so the tight material held it in place. Then, she squatted and picked up her fallen pistol. "Okay, let's go," she said, standing, gesturing with the gun. "Please don't try anything dumb. Don't raise any alarms or cry out. I really don't want to kill a bunch of scientists."

"Are you sure you shouldn't flee, Juliet?" Angel pressed, clearly not happy about being ignored.

"Yeah, Angel. We can't leave Honey here. Not now. Not when we're this close, and I almost died to get to this point. Besides, we can't go out that way. I'm clearly beat to hell and Lemur's dead. How will the gate guards respond to me trying to drive out like this? They'll capture or kill me."

"I see your point."

As they walked, the woman a pace before her, Juliet looked down at her arm and almost chuckled at the black scorch marks all over the red casing. The part that almost made her laugh was the death grip her fist still had on the vibrating knife. She supposed it would be good for intimidation; not everyone knew she couldn't so much as twitch the appendage. "How am I looking?" she subvocalized.

"You have extensive muscle and tendon tearing in your shoulder. You're going to need surgery."

"Oh my god," Juliet snorted.

"What?" the woman asked tremulously.

"Not you. My PAI just made the understatement of the year, and it made me laugh."

"Please don't joke about me with strangers!" Angel said, a definite edge to her tone.

Juliet switched to subvocalizations and said, "I'm sorry, Angel. I'm sorry. I know you're tense because you were worried about me. I'm just trying to keep from losing it. I was so scared!" She paused, gathering her thoughts, then added, "Thank you so much for helping me. Once again, I'd be dead if not for you."

"I'm glad you're alive. We need to get you to safety."

"I know," Juliet said aloud, and when the woman turned toward her, eyes wide with fear, she said, "What's your name?"

"Paula." Her voice was small, scared. Juliet felt sorry for her.

"Is there any way you can get me there without us running into anyone? Listen, Paula, I'm trying to save my friend. The guy who owns this place is not a good person. I just want to get them and get out of here."

"I can try, but there are seven people working this morning." She frowned and corrected herself, "Six. Please don't shoot if we run into someone. Let me talk to them."

"Okay," Juliet said, wondering at the numbness she felt all over her body. Was it the nanites? Had she been hurt so much that they were blocking pain signals all over the place? Was it the, probably near-lethal, dump of hormones Angel had given her so she'd had a chance to hit that hot-wired tattooed guy? She kept seeing her vision darkening on the edges, then brightening, and she knew Angel was working to manipulate her blood pressure, trying to keep her standing. "How bad is it?" she subvocalized, deciding to press for more details this time.

"You have some organ damage, some internal bleeding, and are in need of electrolyte and plasma infusions. The nanites are working hard to seal things up, but they're chewing through your body's resources. We'll keep you going, Juliet, but you'll need serious bed rest."

"The holding rooms are around the corner," Paula said. "I hear people talking, so . . ."

"They're just researchers?" Juliet interrupted.

"Yes, Rutger was the only security down here . . ."

"Okay, let's go. Just stay calm." She motioned forward, and Paula continued, head down, hands clasped before her. When Juliet rounded the corner, she saw a familiar corridor, the same one she'd seen in her camera feed. It ended in a series of stainless security doors, two on each side, and at the far end, a watch station where a woman dressed like Paula sat, leaning back in her chair, speaking with a young man wearing pale blue scrubs.

As Paula approached them, the man looked up and said, "Hey, Paula. Who's this?"

"Nothing to worry about," Paula said, her voice shaking. Then Juliet stepped out from behind her and leveled her gun at the two behind the desk.

"Stay calm. I'm not here to hurt anyone." Juliet tried hard to keep her voice steady.

The woman jerked upright and almost fell out of her chair as it rolled on the hard floor with her sudden movement. She reached toward her desk, and Juliet barked, "Stop! Keep your hands

up! I'm not here to hurt you, but I will if you try to raise an alarm." She jerked sideways a couple of times and said, "Come here. Stand in the hallway near Paula."

"Easy, lady," the man said, cautiously stepping away from the desk, hands up.

"Don't 'easy lady' me, buddy," Juliet growled. "I just had a run-in with your security guy, Rutger, and I'm in no mood for nonsense. Come on!" she yelled at the woman behind the desk, still dawdling in her chair.

The woman jumped up and started forward, hands up. The man spoke again, "You look bad, miss. Should we see to those cuts? You're covered in blood."

"It's not all mine. Just hurry up. Tell 'em what room to open, Paula."

"It's the girl. Lilia. They . . . she's here for Lilia."

"You won't hurt her, will you?" the woman from the desk asked, panic in her voice.

Juliet's patience had fled her, and she looked at her with an utter lack of belief. "Are you kidding me? I'm here to rescue her, you idiot!"

"But her father owns this facility." When Juliet jerked the gun at him, the man raised his hands higher and started toward the second door on the right side of the corridor. "I'm going. I'm going."

"He lied to you if Levkin told you that. He's not her father."

"That's what the nanny said," Paula said, as though she'd somehow joined Juliet's side.

"Au pair," the other woman corrected inanely.

"Just open the door!" Juliet growled.

"Right," the man said, then he touched his palm to the panel, input a code, and the door clicked open. "Honey? Lilia? Someone's here to see you. Stay calm, please."

"Get back!" Juliet yelled, then she gave Paula a shove with the gun barrel, pushing her toward the other two. "Line up on the wall. Hands where I can see them!" She raised her voice even louder, "Honey? Come out. It's me! Don't say my name."

A moment later, a curly black-haired head peered cautiously out the door, and Juliet saw familiar, almond-shaped, brown eyes as Honey scanned the hallway. She gazed over the three research types, then turned down the hallway, and her eyes fell on Juliet, widening further. Before Juliet could utter some encouraging words or try to reassure her that it was safe, Honey burst through the door and charged over the five meters separating them, smashing into Juliet and gripping her in a tight, fierce hug. "Oh, God! I can't believe you got my message. I can't believe you found us!"

"Watch the knife, Honey. I can't move my arm." Juliet almost sobbed with relief as she felt Honey's arms squeezing her tight. She tucked her chin against her shoulder, unable to return

the embrace—she still had her pistol trained on the three medical personnel. “I’m so glad to see you,” she murmured, then, “I’m afraid we’re in trouble, though.”