

"I'm okay to speak openly here?" Lemur asked, glancing at Bennet.

"Yes. As I said, this is a friend, and he might be helping with the operation if there's a role for him." Juliet smiled at Bennet, nodding encouragingly, and he grunted, setting down the last bite or two of his second donut.

"Yeah, um, Lucky saved my life. I won't do anything to get her in trouble."

"Ah, I see," Lemur nodded. "In that case, I'll tell you a bit about what I've accomplished and, in that process, explain to you why my further involvement is crucial to your plans." He paused, looking at Bennet's coffee, but Juliet saw his head shake ever-so-slightly, and he continued, "First of all, a source, someone who's been to the home, said they saw a young girl and a few bedraggled adults unloaded from a transport in the garage eight days ago. Does that fit your time frame?"

"Sounds plausible." Juliet thought about when she'd gotten the message and Angel's estimate on the ship's travel time; it added up.

While she was thinking, Lemur reached down into the pocket of his jeans and produced a fingernail-sized memory chip. "If you wouldn't mind, could you launch the little vid clip I have saved here?" He gestured to Juliet's deck.

"Oh, sure. Is this a good spot to do that?" She gestured around the café. Most of the tables were empty, but a young woman sat by herself a few tables away, and a corpulent man with strange, blue synth-flesh patches on his neck and cheeks sat in the far corner, hunched over some sort of plastic-sleeved graphic novel.

"This is the perfect location. Subterfuge is my specialty, Lucky, and one lesson I'll give you for free—when you act like you're hiding something, people will suspect you of hiding something. Sit in the open sharing a vid file? Who hasn't done something like that with a pair of bosom buddies?" He looked pointedly at Bennet and smiled, and it was such a natural, easy expression, Juliet believed he actually liked the big engineer.

"Right," Juliet said, taking the little chip. She lifted her deck's lanyard over her head and set it on the table. "Sec," she murmured, pulling her data jack out of her left arm, plugging it into the deck, and then subvocalizing, "Check this guy's drive out before you let anything install."

"No problem," Angel said cheerily, as though glad to be involved. Juliet inserted the tiny drive into the slot on her deck and waited for Angel to analyze things. She glanced at Lemur and saw his slight nod of appreciation. Had she just passed some kind of test? A few seconds later, Angel announced, "It's clean. Just a video file with some data, no calls for network access or any other types of hooks, no daemons attached."

Smiling, Juliet touched the deck's screen, selecting the new icon, and a hologram began to play, showing a man, perhaps forty years old, wearing an off-the-rack suit with a name badge that read, "Tyler Baskins, S.T.O. Security." Nothing else was on the file, just the slowly rotating image of Tyler Baskins.

"Do you see?" Lemur asked.

"To be honest? Not really . . ."

“He looks like you,” Bennet said, stifling a burp. At his words, Juliet gave the projection another look, and if she squinted just right, she could see it. Lemur and the man shared some features.

“Exactly right, my good man. I have the means to make myself look quite identical to this fellow, and I’ve already acquired his biometric data. Can you put the rest of the pieces together, Lucky?”

“He works at the, uh, target installation?”

“He works for our target, yes. He’s made a couple of trips out to the new residence in the Xanadu Dome, but he also manages some of the security needs at other facilities owned by the same individual.”

“So, you can get us in?”

“Let’s just say that’s one step that will be a great deal easier now that I’m on your team. We still have a lot of prep work to contend with.” He leaned closer and gently nudged Tyler Baskins in the holographic belly with his pointer finger, causing the image to flicker. Speaking more softly, he said, “We’ll need to take him out of the picture. Temporarily would be preferable, but if circumstances demand something more . . . permanent, I could look the other way.”

“Uh, no. Temporarily would be best.” Juliet nodded emphatically.

“Right! Just so. We’ll have to work on a cover for you and your bulky friend if he’s coming along. We’ll need to devise an extraction plan; there’s no walking out of there with any *friends* we find.” He stressed the word *friends* as though he knew it carried extra weight for Juliet. Was he trying to be clever? Was he trying to manipulate her? Or was he just being careful about not using names?

While her brain spun down paranoid avenues, Lemur continued speaking, and Juliet tuned back in, “. . . would need a solid plan to get off-moon.”

“We can manage . . .” Bennet started to say, but Juliet interrupted him.

“Actually, Lemur, what are the odds our target could lock down the ports or figure out who liberated his *guests*?” Lemur smiled at her choice of words, and she continued, “I don’t want to help out one friend only to get another in more trouble. Do you get my meaning?”

“You’re concerned about your ride. Not a commercial arrangement, then?”

“Not exactly,” Juliet said, locking eyes with Bennet. He got the clue—don’t talk about their ship. Still, Juliet worried that Lemur wouldn’t have much trouble finding out more if he wanted to. Thanks to the lattice, she felt like she could trust him a little bit, but that didn’t extend to putting the crew of the *Kowashi* at risk.

“Right,” Lemur cleared his throat and sat back. “You can kill that projection; I think we all get the idea. So, I feel good about you, Lucky. I’m willing to work with you on the terms we discussed—sharing the contract you negotiated with your client—percentage above twenty to be discussed at a later date. That said, I’m sending a ping to your PAI. If you accept, it contains a secured, encrypted line that we can communicate through. Ah! I see you accepted.” Juliet nodded, sure

that Angel wouldn't have done so if there had been any risk. "In that case, let's do some brainstorming. We can split up tasks as we get details on what we need to do."

"Sounds good. I'll start working out how we'll get off-moon without getting tied up in the port."

"And I shall begin solidifying my cover—a reason why Mr. Baskins needs to return to the house in Xanadu. I'm hoping that, during that process, I might think of a way to hide any guests we liberate from the premises."

"Sounds good. Let's touch base this evening?"

"Tomorrow morning would be better for me. I need to do some investigating tonight." Lemur stood up, offered her and Bennet a short wave, and then walked out of the café as though he'd just finished having breakfast with a friend.

"Weird guy," Bennet said.

"You're calling *him* weird?" Juliet chuckled.

"What? I haven't had a donut in so long! I couldn't stop when I saw that pink glazed beauty . . ."

"Take it easy." Juliet's voice carried a giggle as she spoke, carefully edging the book away from Bennet's plate. "It was funny." She reached over and snatched the last quarter of his donut. "You don't need this, though." As he stared at her with hungry eyes, she popped it into her mouth and savored it—sugary, fatty, fluffy, all the things anyone could love about a donut.

"Thanks for saving me from it," Bennett sighed. "Anyway, that guy seems to know what he's doing."

"Yeah, but," Juliet frowned, "I've been stabbed in the back so many times; I'm nervous about relying on a total stranger like that."

"Isn't that kind of how you SOA operators do things? Team up with strangers and get into all sorts of life-threatening situations together?"

"I guess so." Juliet shrugged. She saw Bennet's frown and narrowed her eyes, adding, "I've done a few jobs like that, but I've spent a lot of time relying on myself, too. The jobs where I worked with a random team were small, for the most part, and a good percentage of them involved some kind of double-cross."

"Dog-eat-dog world, right?" He didn't wait for a response but plowed ahead, "I've got an idea for where you might stow your friends, should it come to that."

"Oh?" Juliet looked in her AUI to check the battery on her deck, saw it was still over fifty percent, and sat back, giving Bennet her full attention.

"Yeah. We've got the gunship in the bay, right? Well, anyone searching the *Kowashi* will see it's salvage. I can weld some plasteel over the corridor leading up to the crew compartments, slap some anti-rad shielding around the hull, and say it's not safe to enter—leaky reactor."

“That’s . . .” Juliet ran through scenarios in her head; there were thousands of ships around New Atlas’s ports at any given time; would the Port Authority spend much time searching each ship? Would they be dissuaded by what Bennet proposed? “It sounds smart to me, but do you think that would be enough? What if they test for radiation?”

“That’s easy enough to spoof. I can put some plasteel panels too close to the *Kowashi*’s reactor for a while and plant them in the hull. Just enough to set off scanners, not hurt anyone nearby.”

“I like it. It’s simple, and sometimes simple is the best way to go. My friends would have facilities in there, too, if you can rig some batteries up to power the water and air circulation systems.”

“Right, but they’d only have to remain hidden until we got off this rock.”

“Sure, and this is worst-case-scenario thinking; I’m imagining our bad guy having enough pull to lock down the docks and force a ship-by-ship search. Nobody could keep that up for long, however. Imagine the costs! Plenty of other rich powerbrokers would throw fits if the port was closed for more than a little while. Right?”

“Exactly. We sit through the search, maybe wait half a day so we’re not the first ship to launch after the lockdown, then we’ll be gone.” Bennet drained the last of his coffee, clearly no longer warm. He grimaced at the flavor and said, “I should have saved some donut to wash that taste out of my mouth. Oh, wait, I did!” He glared at her, mock outrage on his face.

“You’ll get over it.” Juliet stood, picked up the heavy Zelazny book, and walked over to the counter, holding it up. “Miss! I’d like to buy this. I’m assuming, for the price, you’ll throw in an air-tight display case?”

It was almost worth the eight-hundred bits to see the girl force a smile on her black-painted lips as she came around the coffee counter and said, “Oh, certainly, Miss. Will you follow me to the front of the store so I can introduce you to our book curator?”

Ten minutes later, Juliet stood outside the store and took the slender box of flechette rounds from her coat pocket, adding it to the heavy plastic bag containing her spite purchase. She smiled, though—it felt nice to own something luxurious, something impractical yet small enough to stuff into her backpack if she had to make a quick move.

Bennet stretched his neck, making a popping sound, and said, “Well? You have a better idea of your schedule now? I mean, at least for tonight. Wanna get a workout in?”

“You’re like a broken record, my man.” Juliet slapped a hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze through the denim of his jacket, and said, “I want to see what New Atlas is like. How about we drop into a local gym? The cargo bay’s kinda crowded at the moment, anyway.”

“Now you’re speaking my language! Let’s go drop that overpriced hunk of paper off, get changed, and then we can head out. Wanna do anything else? Grab a bite? More shopping?”

“Sure, but this isn’t a date.” Juliet was mostly joking and tried to show it by laughing with her words, but Bennet surprised her with his response.

“Nah, that ship sailed. Now that we’re going into business together, I need to keep things friendly; you understand, right?” His face was solemn, and he reached out, in kind, to grip her shoulder, shrugging as if to say, “It’s out of my hands.”

“Oh, that’s very mature of you, Bennet. Thank you for the easy letdown.” Juliet blew air noisily through her lips and turned to cross the street. “Come on! Let’s get back to the ship.”

She was halfway across when Bennet called after her, “Hey, what? Are you mad? It’s just for the best; don’t take it personally!”

Juliet chuckled, wondering how much he was joking and how much he actually believed; did he think she was upset? Was she? She liked him well enough, but she was fine keeping things friendly. “I mean, he has a hell of a body, though . . .”

“If I know you at all,” Angel said, “I’d say you aren’t upset, but Bennet seems to think you’re angry. Did I miss something?”

“You didn’t calculate his absurd ego.”

“Who are you talking to? Is that Shiro? Any news on the *Bumble* auction?” Bennet asked, jogging onto the sidewalk behind her.

“No, I was making a note to my PAI. Um, what auction?”

“Oh, I decided to list the *Bumble* in a ship auction at the end of the week. I’m waiting to hear if we got in; I guess their docket was pretty full.”

“Is that better than listing it privately?”

“For a wreck like that? Yeah, an auction has more upside potential. We might get lucky and have a few people bid against each other. Someone might risk buying it sight unseen. I put the minimum bid at just a little less than we wanted, so, yeah, I think it’s the smart way to go.”

Juliet paused on the corner, thinking about the walk back to the ship, and asked, “Should we take a cab? I sort of enjoy seeing the city up close.”

“I don’t care. It’s not that far, but we’re not exactly in a nice part of town; wanna save your sightseeing time for later when we’re a bit further away from the port sector?” Bennet kicked at a discarded vape cartridge as if to illustrate the not-so-nice neighborhood.

“All right,” Juliet said, stuffing her hands in her pockets and turning toward Bennet. “I’ll have my PAI call us a ride. So, why do you keep calling the *Bumble* a wreck? It flew just fine from Dione to here.”

“Well, you know the reactor’s got a tiny leak, right? Not enough to be dangerous to the crew, yet, but with H-3 reactors, you can’t mess around—they never don’t get worse. The drives haven’t been serviced as far as I could tell; they’re eating way more fuel than they should, and each of them needs a hundred or more parts replaced. As far as big-ticket items, those are the main problems with the bird, but, come on, those are enough—the two most expensive components of a ship.”

“Didn’t you just sell me on investing in a gunship with the same problems?”

“Hah!” Bennet slapped his thigh and shook his head ruefully, “You got me. But, seriously, it’s apples and oranges. The gunship has a He-3 reactor; you know the difference?”

“Yeah, tritium versus helium-3 fusion. Does it make a big difference?”

“Mmhm, He-3 reactors made by Takamoto? Like the one in that gunship? They make more Energy for the fuel input and hardly generate any waste or radioactivity. The shielding required is a lot less bulky. That makes it worth fixing; that kind of reactor is rare in a ship that size.”

“And the drives?”

“Again. It’s a matter of quality. If we can get them working, each one would be worth more than the entire *Bumble*; I’m confident we can.”

“Here’s our ride,” Juliet said as the silver sedan pulled up, a rainbow-patterned “Atlas Cabs” displayed in a holographic image atop its dome-shaped passenger compartment. They rode back to the docks in relative silence, Juliet mulling over what Bennet had told her. She believed him, at least about the quality of the Takamoto tech. She’d seen the difference that kind of pre-war technology could make when she’d compared White’s gauss rifle to the one made by Grave. Thinking about White’s rifle, she asked, “Bennet, you called the ship’s main gun a ‘rail’ gun. Is that what it is, or is it a big gauss rifle?”

“No, it’s a rail gun—big electric current drives a conductive projectile through the barrels. We’re talking ship-killing rounds here; they’ll punch through a ton of armor, and if they don’t, the kinetic energy of the impact would be devastating in itself. The three barrels are meant to reduce wear and tear and allow the metal to cool between shots. I mean, Takamoto did a hell of a job with the alloy; it’s the most durable shit I’ve ever looked up. I sure hope we can find some replacements.”

“All right, all right. I’ve picked your brain enough. By the way, you passed my examination; as a shareholder in Gunship, Inc., I’ll approve of you arranging the repairs.”

“Oh, well, thank you, Madam Shareholder.” Bennet did something funny with his hands—Juliet couldn’t tell if he was mimicking someone drinking tea or performing some sort of absurd salute, but she laughed either way. “Anyway,” he said as they stopped laughing. “Here we are.” He pointed to the window where Juliet could see the now-familiar line of flowering trees outside the row of docking passages. “Want to invite anyone else? It might be nice to have a toast to, um, successful operations here on Titan.”

“Yeah. Let’s put the invite out to the whole crew. They can meet us afterward if they don’t want to hit the gym. I’m feeling fairly optimistic, to be honest. It seems like my contact here was pretty well prepared, better than I’d hoped. I feel like we might have the kernel of a plan already, and that’s a hell of a lot more than I had a couple of hours ago.”

“Right! We’ll have a toast to plans and their kernels, to ship sales and ship repairs!”

“Is that all one toast or three? I don’t want a headache tomorrow, Bennet!” Juliet felt good, more than optimistic, as she followed him out of the cab. She was still smiling, still thinking about how well everything went with Lemur, when a familiar deep voice spoke up from behind her.

“Oh, look who it is. Hey there, spacer bitch.”