

When Juliet and Honey stepped into the reception area, they found Applebaum leaning on the counter, chatting with Frida. When they came into view, he got quiet, but the lingering smile and the mischief in his eyes told Juliet he'd been talking trash. "Oi, ladies," he said as they came into view. "Showers work out all right?" He couldn't have been there long because he was freshly showered, himself, wearing a very nicely fitted suit, apparently just getting ready to start his workday at the "office."

"Your place is in this building?" Honey asked, ignoring the question.

"Oh yeah. Talk about an easy commute. I'm two floors down."

"Tanaka pays for it," Frida chimed in.

Juliet seized the opportunity for a dig and snorted, "Must be nice."

"Hey! That apartment is part of my compensation, which I earn quite nicely, I might add." As Juliet stepped closer, holding her practice monoblade by the sheath, resting it on her shoulder, he changed subjects again. "Shouldn't that be on your belt? By the way, I thought you were a novice."

Juliet's earlier teasing took a blunt turn as she failed to keep his needling from getting to her. "I don't have clips for this belt yet, and mind your own business."

"Don't try to figure her out," Honey laughed, jostling her shoulder. "She always learns things fast. She was beating groups of blue belts at our old dojo after a few months of practice."

He nodded, turning back to Juliet. "So you do have experience?"

"Not with the sword," Honey answered for her. "She watched me in plenty of practices, though."

"Well, I could see the boss was happy with your men-uchi. Took me a hell of a lot longer before he stopped making me adjust my grip or the blade or . . . Ah, you get the idea."

Juliet tapped her fingers on the sword hilt, narrowing her eyes at him, waiting for the other shoe, the "backhand" part of his backhanded compliment. When he didn't say anything more, she shrugged, "I have a good memory for things like that. If I see it done right, I can usually copy it pretty quickly." She turned toward Frida. "You about ready?"

"Yes!" She hurriedly stood and pushed her chair in. "Boss knows I'm leaving, so just forward anything that comes my way to my PAI, all right?" She spoke to Applebaum, and he shrugged.

"Yeah, sure. I don't have anything until that client meeting at one."

"Thanks, Leo." Frida walked around her desk and the attached reception counter and gestured to the doors. "Shall we?" Honey was already walking that way, pulling the big glass door open, and Juliet nodded.

Applebaum sighed and straightened up, making a show of stretching his waist, pressing his fist into his lower back. "Well, bye then. When's the next practice? Boss didn't say anything to me."

"Monday," Honey called, holding the door for Juliet and Frida.

In the elevator, Frida said, "Did you decide to join us, Honey?"

"No, sorry. I have to get to work." She smiled at Juliet, something in her eyes indicating that she was trying to be pleasant to Frida. Juliet smiled back, then saw Frida watching them exchange their look and tried to play it off, smiling at her too. It felt weird, and the silence in the elevator was getting heavy and awkward by the time the doors opened, and Honey hurried out. She waved and called over her shoulder, "Talk soon!" Then she was gone, the automated lobby doors closing on her quickly retreating form.

"She was in a hurry!" Frida said brightly, gesturing toward the far end of the lobby. "Restaurant's that way."

"I'm starving. They have good sandwiches?"

"Great burgers, for sure. Not sure what else; I usually get a salad, but Leo's always getting a burger with fries, making me jealous."

"You guys eat here all the time, huh?" Juliet supposed she'd do the same if she worked in the building.

"Yep." She led the way into the restaurant, nodded when the hostess greeted her, and followed her to a table already set for two. "They know me, and I called ahead to say we were coming," Frida explained, glancing nervously at Juliet.

"Cool." Juliet sat down, leaning her practice sword against her chair. "I left Rutger's, well, my monoblade in my locker. It's safe there, yeah?"

"I'd say so. We have good security at the office. Besides, it's also the Boss's home, and he never leaves." Frida sat across from Juliet, and the hostess left, muttering something about their specials being listed on the restaurant page. "I take it that means the lesson went well? You'll be back?"

Juliet snorted. "Oh, c'mon. Don't act like you didn't get the whole scoop from Applebaum already." Frida fidgeted with her hands in her lap and looked down, her pale cheeks reddening a little. "You must have hated that when you were younger," Juliet said.

"Hated?"

"How easily your skin shows you're flushed."

"I'm . . . well, yeah, I guess so. Forget that, though. I always feel like I'm off balance with you. You know, when I found you on Callisto, I thought I was going there to do you a favor. I thought you were on the run from Tanaka, and you'd be relieved to hear he wanted to talk. You kind of threw everything out of balance when you shot me in the chest!"

"Balance?" Juliet sighed, drinking down half her glass of water. "You mean you're used to everyone walking on eggshells and being intimidated when they find out who your boss is." She set the glass down, sliding it in a small circle of condensation on the tabletop. "You didn't find me, in any case. Remember? I found out you were looking and contacted you. Anyway, I'm sorry I shot you. I'm pretty glad, now that I know who you are, that I didn't kill you."

“You know who I am?” Frida raised an eyebrow.

“I know Tanaka’s more like a dad than a boss to you. I know you’re not exactly a hired gun, so yeah, I know enough.”

“He told you that?”

“Not in so many words . . .” Tanaka had certainly never used the word “dad.”

“Do you do it on purpose, though? Say things to get me all mixed up?”

This time, it was Juliet’s turn to feel caught off guard by Frida’s bluntness. Was she doing it on purpose? She had to admit that she kind of enjoyed seeing Frida squirm, and she didn’t really know what she was getting out of it. She liked her well enough—Frida didn’t rub her wrong the way Applebaum had been. Was that it? Did she think Frida was cute or . . . realizing she was scowling in thought and not answering the question, Juliet cleared her throat and said, “I don’t think I do it on purpose. I think I had an idea of what you were like when I first learned you worked for Tanaka. I suppose that wasn’t fair, and . . .” Juliet felt like she was babbling. “So, anyway, let’s start over. How about that?”

“That would be perfect!” Frida’s smile was bright and genuine, and Juliet didn’t need to read her mind to know she was relieved. “Let’s take a minute to order.”

“All right.” Angel pulled the menu up for Juliet, and she saw the burgers were supposedly well-reviewed, so she ordered a “Big Buster’s BBQ Burger.” Juliet touched a link next to the burger and was shown photos of the “slow-grow” lattices in a local synth-meat plant. Flashing text displayed multiple five-star reviews and local articles about the fantastic texture and taste. Juliet shook her head, smiling, as she waved the menu away. “I’m taking your advice and trying a burger.”

“Leo’s kind of a food snob, so I think you’ll be happy. He doesn’t usually praise food.”

“Leo? A snob? Who could guess? What’d you get? The salad?”

“Nope! I’m splurging today. I’ve been fasting. Yesterday, I didn’t eat at all.”

“So, what did you get?”

Frida opened her pale green eyes wide and grinned, hunching her shoulders and speaking in a conspiratorial whisper, “Deep dish, four-cheese, personal pizza!”

“Sounds absolutely awesome. Now I’m wondering if I messed up . . .”

“I’ll give you a slice!”

“But you’re, like, starving.” Juliet frowned. “Why’d you skip a whole day of eating?”

“Ugh! I hate talking about this stuff, but I guess I’m the one who brought it up. It’s my autoimmune disorder. I have more augments than it looks like.” She gestured to herself as though she wanted Juliet to agree that it didn’t look like she had many cybernetic implants. “I’ve

had some pretty invasive ones since I was little.” She shrugged. “Anyway, my immune system is . . . overzealous. I have medical nanites that help keep it calmed down, but my current doctor recommended some fasting periods. Something about my body cannibalizing the misbehaving white blood cells. I’m supposed to go for three days, but . . .” She shrugged.

“It’s hard, I bet.”

“Yeah. I keep making it a day, then finding an excuse to eat again.”

Juliet frowned. “It’s not like you have a bunch of stored fat. How often are you supposed to do that?”

“Only when I’m having a flare-up.” She reached up to her silky blouse and undid the top two buttons, pulling it wide, showing Juliet her red, inflamed skin. The irritation looked like it originated from a red, blotchy, keloid scar right in the center above the delicate, flower-stitched lace of her bra.

“Hold up! Is that where I shot you? Did I cause your . . .”

“No! No, the scar’s there, but this current flare-up only started a week ago. Anyway, forget it. Sorry I mentioned this stuff. I’m fine. My nanites keep things from getting bad. When I was a teen, I used to struggle to walk when I had a flare-up. The pain in my joints got so bad that it felt like they were filled with broken glass. Now I get a bad rash and a little achy if I sit too long. Things could be worse.”

“Huh.” Juliet finished her water, looking around to see if there was hope for a quick refill. Quite a few tables were busy, and the wait staff seemed almost harried.

“Huh?” Frida frowned.

“Oh, I was just thinking we should have a cure for whatever is causing that by now. We can transplant pretty much every organ. We can clone cells and inject little robots that mend flesh. You’d think they could give you something to . . .” Juliet shrugged, unsure where she’d been going with that train of thought.

“Hey, forget it. Please. Like I said, it’s not very bad.” Frida was clearly ready to change the subject, so Juliet took the initiative.

“Well, what’s the deal with your boss, huh?”

“You tell me!” Frida laughed, shaking her head in chagrin. “What did you do to him?” She held up a hand, waving it back and forth. “That was rhetorical. I know what happened. I just wish I knew what *happened*, you know?”

“You mean with his mind?”

“Right! I know you and he fought, and I know you thought you were in the right . . .”

“That’s ‘cause I was.”

Frida frowned but didn't argue. "Anyway, I know what happened to him, how he almost died, how his nanites were almost out of oxygen when the trauma center got him. He was in a coma for a while after the operations. The trauma center didn't want to replace all of his organs until they'd seen he was going to wake; apparently, a significant percentage of people who go that deep never come out of it. I insisted, though, and he had the package paid for, so they had to do it. His body was almost mended when he woke up, but his eyes weren't the same. Something in them was gone or changed."

She took a drink, probably wondering if Juliet would say anything, but when she didn't, Frida kept speaking. "It says a lot about people, doesn't it? That his eyes weren't the same? I mean, he's got chrome, robot-looking eye implants, but there was still something in his expression. The way his eyebrows moved, the wrinkles at the corners . . ." She sighed, shaking her head. "I can't explain it, but something's different in there."

Juliet was spared from having to reply immediately when one of the waitstaff brought their food and drinks. Her burger certainly looked good, from the slightly crusty fresh-baked bun to the thick, heavily seasoned potato fries. Juliet ate one right away, and she was sure her face showed her pleasure as the salty, greasy morsel danced over her tastebuds.

"Good?" Frida grinned, looking down at her pizza. It looked decadent—more cheese than Juliet had eaten in weeks.

"Yeah, it's good. You know what they say, though—hunger's the best sauce or something like that."

"Hah. You sound like Tanaka; he's always quoting things like that." She frowned, pulling a tiny piece off her crust and chewing it absently. "This synth-cheese is supposed to be hypoallergenic."

"Hope it tastes as good as it looks."

Frida pulled a piece of pizza from the dish and set it on her plate to cool. "Well? Any response to all that? I mean, about Tanaka?"

Juliet sighed and leaned back, holding a thick fry between her thumb and pointer finger, waiting for it to cool just a little before she stuffed it in her mouth. "I don't know what you want from me, Frida. I didn't know the guy before our encounter, and I don't know what has changed about him. I mean, sure, he almost died. He says things like he *did* die, that he's not the same man I killed. I don't know what to make of it all other than it's pretty damn weird. He seems genuine. He seems to really want to help me now, and shit, if that's true, then what's wrong with that? Maybe he does have some things to atone for, you know? Regardless of what you think, he wasn't exactly on the right side on Titan. He's already admitted to me that he's done plenty of immoral things in his life."

"But you're willing to work with him?"

"Is that what this is about?" Juliet stuffed the fry in her mouth, chewing, staring at Frida.

"Kind of. He's been obsessed with finding you, and I could tell he was very stressed, very worried that things wouldn't go well and that you'd leave. I just, well, I just want you to know that

he's been better since having dinner with you and that I hope you'll keep coming around, even if it's just to train. I feel like he's finally on the mend." She tapped her head. "Up here."

"The lesson went well, despite Applebaum." Juliet took another fry off her plate and blew on it. "Even Honey was enthused—said Tanaka knows a lot more than her old teacher. I think we'll keep coming around for a while." A thought occurred to her, and she asked, "You live with him? I mean, is this your . . ."

"Home?" Frida chuckled and shook her head. "I have my own place on Titan. I thought we'd go back, that this was temporary, but now I'm not sure. The boss is liquidating a lot of his holdings. I'm not sure he even still owns his place on Titan 'cause some crates showed up here the other day with his artwork. I'll probably get my own place here, too, and see how things shake out."

"What about the rest of the team? Hawkins, right? And didn't you say he had some guys searching around Mars when we first met?"

"Yeah, Lee and Barns. Those four are his last full-time operatives. He lost a few on Titan . . ." She grimaced. "As you know. Anyway, they're all here twiddling their thumbs, collecting their on-call pay, and making bets about what weird thing Boss will do next."

"He dumped a lot of money into that dojo." Juliet took her knife and, pressing it flat with one hand, sliced her burger in half. As she lifted it for a bite, sweet barbeque sauce dripping down her chin while she chewed, she listened to Frida's response.

"He's been bleeding bits ever since he woke up, but that's after nearly thirty years of big paydays and very frugal living. He's a savvy man, always has been, and he invested quite a lot in some very successful ventures. I guess the moral of the story is, don't be concerned about the money he's spent trying to court you."

"Court me?" Juliet almost choked on her bite.

"Poor choice of words! I mean, like, recruit? No, um, seek your favor? Oh, God, I'm making it worse. Put it this way: I think it boils down to him wanting to help you. We've all been wondering what he was doing, why he was paying so much for rumors, for people to travel, for, well, everything that led up to you coming here this morning and taking a lesson from him." She used her fork to cut off a bite of pizza and lifted it to her mouth. Before putting it in her mouth, she added, "Now, I just want to make sure you're not going to yank the rug out from under his feet." She looked so happy when she bit into the thick, greasy, cheesy forkful of pizza that Juliet couldn't help smiling as she watched her chew.

When she swallowed, Juliet asked, "Good as you'd hoped?"

"Better!" Frida licked her lips and took a long pull of soda through her straw.

"Tell me about the guys. What are they good at?" Juliet knew Angel had most of the information she might want about Rutger's crew, but she wanted to hear what Frida had to say about them. "I'm curious what kind of . . . attitudes, I guess, I might have to deal with when or if I meet them."

"Well, you met Applebaum, yeah? Like I told you, he's known Tanaka the longest. Other than me, I mean. He's a charmer when he wants to be, and Rutger has him do most of the client

meetings. He's still doing some work on his own while Boss figures things out. He's a marksman and has operated as a face. Rutger has a dozen solid, fully-vetted IDs for him."

"Hawkins is a quiet man, and you won't have to worry about attitude from him; he doesn't really talk to people. He's a killer, the most dangerous of them all, other than the boss. Once, he cut the power on a human trafficking hub and cleared the place out with just a knife."

"A hub?"

"Like, the place where the gang doing the kidnapping brought their victims to ship them around the system. Hawkins didn't want to cause a big firefight around the kids, so he went in quiet-like with his knife." Frida's eyes were excited as she spoke, clearly savoring the memory. "We earned a bonus from the client, and Boss gave Hawkins a tattoo to commemorate."

"Tanaka does tattoos?"

"Oh yes! Old-school, too, with needles and special inks."

"What about the other two?"

"Dora Lee is a netjacker and also an espionage expert. She's one of the best—A-ranked SOA operative. Very professional. Doesn't mix business and pleasure; she's probably working now, despite Rutger asking everyone to keep their plates empty, but we'd never know it."

"She, huh? Why'd I think Rutger's team were all men?"

"Well, don't let Lee catch you calling her a lady. I'll leave it at that."

"Okay, so he's got a face, a killer, a netjacker. What's the last guy?"

"Barns? He's a typical commando. Kind of a jack of all trades—some explosives, some tech skills, but mostly just really good at picking the right guns and being in the right place at the right time. He's kind of a blowhard, and he'll flirt with anything that has two legs, but once you learn it's all hot air, you can kind of appreciate his . . . stability."

"And then there's Tanaka."

"Yeah. When he was on top of his game before you messed up his mind," she shook her head and smiled, softening the words, "he was well-regarded. Probably the highest-paid merc on Titan." Frida took another bite of pizza, and Juliet grinned, watching her draw a big cheese pull away with her fork.

"Why don't you just pick that up and bite it? You worried about impressing me? C'mon, I have barbeque all over my face."

Frida smiled while she chewed, and before she'd even swallowed, she picked up her pizza slice and stuffed another big bite in her mouth. "Happy?" she mumbled around her mouthful.

Juliet grinned and nodded. "Yeah, I think so. You seem all right, Frida." She wasn't lying, but that didn't mean she trusted her. She still fully intended to read some of her thoughts before they left. She liked what she'd heard about Rutger's mercs, however. She hoped they were as

good and as loyal as Frida thought. If she were going to get the old mercenary to help her put a plan together against WBD, they'd need some loyal, unshakable team members.