

As the alarm continued to sound and the flashing red lights cast the corridor in their hysterical gleam, Shiro whirled on Juliet and said, “You have to turn yourself over!”

“This isn’t about me, Shiro!” Juliet shook her head. It couldn’t be, could it? “Angel,” she said aloud so Shiro would know what she was doing, “Show me footage of the docking tunnel. Scan for recent activity.” While she waited, Juliet saw Shiro accessing the ship’s systems, his eyes somewhat glazed, staring into space.

“Damn it! We need more cameras in this ship, Bennet. Why are the comms offline?”

“You specifically told me not to install more . . .”

“Quiet,” Shiro growled, and Bennet’s scowl deepened in response. Juliet could tell he’d just about had enough of Shiro talking down to him.

As the siren and warning message halted, apparently stopped by Shiro, Angel opened a window in her AUI, and Juliet watched three men, all carrying sleek assault rifles, walking up the docking corridor and entering the *Kowashi’s* airlock. “Those aren’t corpo-sec!” Juliet said, a little too gleefully, perhaps. She turned to Shiro as she pulled her helmet back on, wincing at the discomfort, and said, “Get back in the infirmary. Lock the door. Somehow three mercs got on the ship. Who was the guy you were meeting with?”

“I will not hide! Where’s Alice?” Shiro slammed one fist into an open palm, and Juliet could see there was no arguing with him. She shrugged out of her backpack and dug around, finding her spider drone. She set it onto the plasteel floor, then she tossed the bag into the infirmary and held her palm to the panel, locking it.

“I’ll find her,” she said. Angel didn’t hesitate, activating the drone and piloting it away, down the hallway toward the auxiliary access ladder. “Where’s Aya?”

“Something’s still wrong with comms. Nobody’s answering me,” Bennet said.

“Angel?” Juliet asked.

“Perhaps someone has infiltrated the ship’s systems. It’s possible they forced Alice to do something. She couldn’t have called us for help if they were jamming locally.”

“My PAI thinks they might have forced Alice to shut down the ship’s comms. She probably triggered the alarm while she was at it. Who was the broker, Shiro?”

“Some independent. I don’t know!” He threw up his hands. “Said his name was Hernandez. Obviously, it was a fake . . .”

“We can’t keep standing here.” Juliet pulled back the bolt on her SMG, ensured a round was chambered, then started toward the lift. “If you guys want to help, stay out of sight and don’t become a hostage.”

“I’m getting my gun,” Shiro barked, jogging behind her.

“I’m taking the service ladder down to engineering—gonna find Aya,” Bennet said. Juliet barely heard him; she was focused on her drone feed, watching as it approached the airlock, dreading

what she might find. She'd just stepped onto the lift when the drone got eyes on them, all three mercs in their green and brown body armor and another man wearing an ill-fitting suit that seemed badly out of style—no one in New Atlas she'd seen had been wearing anything like it. Green lapels on a gray jacket, tight, tapered slacks that disappeared into voluminous, black, knee-high boots, and an odd, gray hat with a wide oval brim and a silky green band.

Seeing the men clustered near the airlock door didn't bother her; she was glad they were all there. What concerned her was the crumpled body against the corridor wall. Juliet would recognize Alice's pale blue jumpsuit anywhere, but if that weren't enough, she could see a shock of bright red hair sticking out beneath the figure's outstretched arms. "I've got eyes on her," she said, reaching out to stop Shiro from touching the lift's control panel. "I've got eyes on all of them. Alice is down, and four men are huddled near the airlock talking. Hold on, sharing the drone's feed."

Shiro's scowl became wide-eyed despair as he started to watch the drone's footage. He began to speak but stopped as soon as Angel managed to grab the invaders' audio with the drone, transmitting their words.

". . . she shouldn't have done that. Stupid bitch," one of the helmeted mercs said.

"You shouldn't have hit her, dumbass! If these scavs have any guns on this ship, now we don't have a hostage!" the guy in the suit replied, giving his shoulder a shove.

"Relax, boss," a different merc said, still fiddling with the data terminal near the airlock. "She got us into the system before she touched the alarm. Cameras are off, and we've got 'em locked in; I blocked their connection to the port comms—using their own comm array to jam signals in here."

"Well," the suit said, "let's find that goddamn synth. Shoot any of these assholes that show their faces. Open up their PA system." He walked over to the guy by the data terminal. While he moved, Juliet touched the lift button that would bring her to their level, just one up from where she and Shiro stood. The lift cranked into motion, whirring its old grease-covered gears, and then the PA crackled, and the man's voice came through, echoing weirdly with the drone's feed before Angel squelched it. "Attention, crew. Stay in your quarters. Don't show your faces, and we won't hurt you. We're here for something that belongs to us. Once we have it, we'll leave. We have your pilot here; don't make us hurt her."

"Those bastards," Shiro growled.

"Where did Bennet take that synth from the *Bumble*?"

"Synth? Damn it!" Shiro's face went from confusion to fury, and he slapped himself on the forehead. "That guy, the broker, asked us if we had any synths on board. We told him no . . ."

"So, he decided to invade the ship?" Juliet frowned as the lift jerked to a halt.

"Juliet, two things," Angel interrupted, "The men are moving up the corridor, and one of them has a canister hanging from his pack. It's labeled as Venox-7, a potent nerve toxin."

"Before you ask," Juliet told Shiro, "We can't just hide and let them find the synth. Alice could be bleeding out, for one thing, and for another, they're carrying a canister of nerve toxin. I don't

think they plan to leave witnesses behind.” Juliet stepped off the lift and pressed the fat button that would send it up to the hab level. “Find your gun but be careful. I’m going to try to stop them before they get out of that corridor.”

Shiro opened his mouth as the battered plasteel platform started to carry him up, but he locked eyes with Juliet and closed it, nodding. She knew he was still pissed at her, but she also knew he was counting on her to save Alice and, hopefully, the rest of them. She turned and hurried toward the airlock, only two turns separating her from the men walking steadily toward the corner where the drone lurked.

“Angel,” Juliet subvocalized, “Can you do anything with the ship’s systems? Are you locked out?”

“The comms are fully offline, locked with Alice’s command code. I have access to other systems, though.”

“When they reach the corner, kill the lights, but not before you turn on my night vision. Also, I’m going to be very careful with my aim, but if you think I’ll hit that canister, please stop me. You’re connected to my gun, right?”

“Yes, I’ll prevent it from firing if I believe you’ll hit the canister.”

Juliet stopped at the second to last turn before the airlock, just five meters separating her from the final corner the four men were approaching. She saw her drone, a little black ball with stick legs just barely peering around the corner. In her AUI, its feed showed the men, the three mercs up front, guns held at the ready but walking upright, almost lackadaisical in their confidence. “This is how they act when they think they’ve got a few scared salvage techs to deal with,” Juliet subvocalized, trying to convey her anger to the only person who could hear her—Angel.

Angel didn’t reply, probably because she didn’t want to distract Juliet further; the men were almost to the drone. They were just a couple of steps away when the one on the left, a tall, lanky fellow with a decal of a middle finger on the side of his tan helmet, glanced down and caught a glimpse of the drone before Angel could pull it back. He shouted, “Hold!” Then, faster than Juliet thought should be possible, he tossed a round, ball-shaped object around the corner. Juliet didn’t have much experience with full, no-holds-barred, military-style combat. Even so, she knew he’d thrown a grenade, and though she was around another corner, well out of a typical grenade’s blast radius, she still winced and almost started shooting reflexively.

Angel instantly dimmed her visual input and dampened her auditory feedback, and as the grenade burst, flaring brightly and filling the space with white light, Juliet hardly noticed it. “A flash bang,” Angel reported. The burst of light and sonic concussion only lasted a second, and Angel switched Juliet’s ocular implants to the green monochrome of night vision. As the three mercs came around the corner, guns ready, she killed the lights.

Whatever Juliet hoped would happen, she ended up disappointed. The men might have paused for a fraction of a second, but they all had helmets with visors on and probably had ocular implants to boot. Even so, she was the first to start shooting and managed to land a three-round burst into the chest and neck of the lead merc. As he fell, gargling and thrashing, the other two split left and right and sprayed automatic fire at the corner where Juliet had been lurking.

Their rapid response was to no avail; Juliet had anticipated their return fire. She'd already lifted her muzzle and backed around the corner, still back peddling as the merc's bullets exploded violently into the plasteel walls. She turned and ran back to the next corner. Another concussive explosion behind her told her she'd retreated just in time.

Rounding the corner, Juliet saw Shiro stepping off the lift with his pistol held ready around twenty meters away. She violently waved for him to get out of there but didn't have time to wonder if he complied; she had a handful of seconds before they rounded the last corner. "Is the drone dead?"

"Offline."

Juliet, anticipating another flash bang, backed up ten meters, halfway to the lift, and squatted low, her MP5 ready. Sure enough, a green ball clattered around the corner—Angel dimmed her senses, and as soon as it exploded and the white flare faded, she turned them back up. Juliet was out in the open, in the middle of the hallway, but she tried to present a small target, crouched low next to the wall, helmet tilted down slightly, and as soon as the men charged around the corner on the heels of the flash bang, she started shooting.

Her first burst took the guy on the right in the knee and thigh, and he fell, crying out and cursing. As she shifted her crosshairs to the other merc, he was already firing, and she felt a heavy thud on her helmet as a rifle round hit it on the left side, slamming her helmet against the wall. She was so wired on adrenaline that she barely noticed. Another round slammed into her chest, just below her left collarbone, but then she was on target and squeezing the trigger. Her suppressed MP5 rapidly clicked on full auto as she sprayed a burst of rounds into the man's center of mass, catching his rifle and left hand in the volley.

His screams joined his comrade's when one bullet hit him in the knuckles. Another ripped through the receiver of his assault rifle, and it exploded, the gasses from his own round widening the hole Juliet's bullet had made. He stumbled back, fumbling with his one good hand for the grip of a sidearm, and Juliet fired another burst into his stomach right below the bottom edge of his ballistic vest.

Plenty of drills with Zeta Protocol had taught her never to count a downed enemy as out, so she was just bringing her gun back to bear on the merc she'd hit in the leg when he started firing his sidearm at her. Another bullet zinged off her helmet, tearing a groove along the crown of her head, then a second one smashed into her shin. She screamed in agony as the burning, liquid pain spread up her leg like a lightning bolt, but as her vision went red with agony, anger, and fear, she drilled down on it, focused on her enemy, and kept shooting, one careful squeeze after another, punching holes in the merc's semi-prone form until he dropped his pistol and lay, unmoving.

Juliet reflexively popped out her magazine and replaced it with a full one, realizing she wasn't feeling any pain; her nanites had gotten to work. She stood from her crouch and walked forward, barrel trained on her downed enemies. Neither moved, and both were rapidly cooling according to the readout on her AUI—dead. Her leg didn't hurt; she couldn't feel it at all, and it was still working, though her foot squelched as her boot filled with blood. Juliet kept moving, trusting Angel to warn her if the nanites couldn't stop the bleeding. She still had to deal with the guy in the suit.

Her bullet readout reminded her she had a full magazine, and she could see Shiro quietly creeping up behind her in her rear-view feed. She opted not to yell at him to run; the primary threat should be over. When she reached the body of the first merc she'd killed, she saw the canister of toxin and breathed a sigh of relief—she'd briefly feared the “broker” might have recovered it and would use it as leverage. Her relief was short-lived, however. When she rounded the final corner and looked toward the airlock, she saw him standing there, Alice slumped at his feet. He was nearly fully exposed, but he held a pistol in one hand, the barrel firmly pressed to Alice's red hair.

“Let's not have any more bloodshed, all right?” he asked, reaching up with his free hand to stroke the brim of his absurd hat.

“Get that gun off her head,” Juliet growled. She kept stepping forward, trying to close the distance between them.

“You first. Put your muzzle down.” The broker wore a smile beneath his bushy blond mustache, and Juliet thought the look in his pale gray eyes was far too cool and calculated for a man who'd just lost all three of his mercs. Was he really so confident?

“Anything in the docking corridor?” Juliet subvocalized.

“Nothing. I've sealed the airlock door,” Angel replied instantly.

“You seem awfully smarmy for a man who just lost all his muscle. Do you think you know me that well? That I won't gun you down regardless of what you do to that woman there?” Juliet hoped that if she acted unfamiliar with Alice, he'd lose some confidence in the protective value of his hostage. Her mind was racing for ideas; should she bargain with him? Lower her gun, and give him the synth? Could she really let a man like that walk away? Surely he'd hold a grudge, and though her identity was safe, he knew everyone on the *Kowashi's* crew manifest.

“I'm unable to find a record of this man's face in the public nets,” Angel said. Juliet lifted her gun's muzzle, training the crosshairs right on his forehead.

“I said lower your gun!” His voice was losing some of its composure. He viciously grabbed Alice's hair with his free hand, holding her head steady while he ground his pistol against it. Her body was completely limp, and if Juliet couldn't see her temperature, she might have feared she was dead. That thought gave her an idea.

“Why would I? I can see from her temp that she's already dead.”

“No . . .” his eyes widened, he glanced down at Alice, and he reflexively started to point his pistol in Juliet's direction. Juliet took her shot. One careful press of the trigger and her gun spat out a round that took him dead in the center of his forehead. He fell back, a lifeless ragdoll. Alice slumped forward, and Shiro ran past Juliet to grab her in his arms. Juliet let the breath she'd been holding whistle out between her lips. Had it been reckless to shoot him like that? Maybe, she decided, but she hadn't had another good idea, and the moment happened very quickly; it had been a judgment call.

“Shiro!” Juliet yelled. She took a step forward, and though it didn't hurt, her foot didn't bend quite right, and she found herself limping as she hurried toward him. “You need to re-enable comms. I don't have permission.”

“Hai. I will after I get Alice into the infirmary. You stopped my heart when you told that man she was dead.”

“I’m sorry, but I wanted to distract him.”

“You did good.” His gruff voice and emotional tone brought up all sorts of feelings in Juliet. She had to look away as he picked up Alice and hurried past her toward the infirmary because her eyes had begun to fill with tears. She’d felt horrible when he said she had to leave the ship and still hadn’t had time to process those words. She still feared he’d feel that way; somehow, along with everything else, she also felt responsible for this recent bout of violence. That said, hearing him appreciate her actions meant a lot. She felt like such a screw-up, like she’d done nothing but cause problems for one group of people after another, and she didn’t know what to do with the intense feelings warring for space in her heart.

Part of her wanted to be angry. Part of her wanted to rail at everyone and scream that she was just trying to do her best to help people. She wasn’t there because she wanted to be! She was there because she had a friend in trouble. She hadn’t helped Rissa and Cel because she wanted to get the *Kowashi* crew into trouble with EvoGen or anyone; she’d just been trying to do the right thing as she saw it. Was she supposed to look the other way? Was she supposed to grow callouses over her heart and stop caring about people? “I won’t do that,” she said, limping back toward the lift, sniffing, rubbing the back of her hand at the annoying tears leaking out of her eyes.

Angel spoke to her while she passed by the bullet-riddled scenes of her firefights, past the corpses of the mercs who’d been out to kill everyone on the ship. She told Juliet about what the nanites were doing and how she’d have a scar on her shin and calf, but nothing was permanently damaged. The bullet had torn a notch in her tibia and slipped out between it and her fibula, ripping her calf muscle in the process. She recommended antiseptic glue and a tight bandage but thought the nanites would have it largely repaired within a couple of days. Her drone was unresponsive, and Angel feared it would need a new battery.

Juliet, once again, pulled her sweaty helmet off and examined it. She figured she should have it looked at by a professional; wouldn’t it lose integrity as it absorbed bullets? She was halfway to the lift, in that last stretch of hallway where she’d made her stand, when it clanked up the shaft, Bennet standing atop it. He hurried toward her, calling out, “Goddamn, that was scary! Those booms! Were they grenades? We’re lucky they didn’t breach the hull! Shiro still hasn’t turned on the comms. He’s fussing over Alice. Who the fuck were those guys?” When Juliet continued to limp toward him but didn’t say anything, he added, “Are you okay?”

“I guess so.” She shrugged, pausing and leaning a shoulder against the wall. “Bennet, where did you put that synth from the *Bumble*?”