

It turned out that Ernie was more than willing to spill his guts once Juliet dragged him outside the airlock away from the big guy, Willis. Vickie ran an operation that fronted as a legitimate salvage yard in a neighboring industrial dome. Ernie claimed she had a hundred thugs working for her and that if you bought some hot tech at a steep discount on Luna, she probably had a hand in its procurement. After taping him back up, Juliet stepped outside the warehouse with Sergeant Hines. The sky was entering its twilight phase, and the air had gotten a little chilly while they were inside.

Hines looked in the donut box Aya had left on Juliet's bike. Only a couple of halves remained within—a chocolate and a plain glazed. Hines picked up the chocolate half-donut and raised an eyebrow at Juliet. She smiled. "Go for it."

He took a bite, then, as he chewed, laid out his thoughts, "I can book these guys and transfer them to North Luna District—I'll put 'em on a communication lockdown pending investigation, so they won't be able to spill their guts to this Vickie individual. I know you probably want to go after her right away, but that won't be the smart move. Give me some time to dig around, find out what her deal is, and, more importantly, who's been protecting her. Believe me, someone's been protecting her. No way she grows an operation that size without me having any clue about it, otherwise."

"As in *corpo sec*?"

"Or one of the corps that pay our bills." Hines shrugged. "More likely, a combination of the two."

"She's targeting me. Worse, she's going after my friends here 'cause of me. What do I do while you figure things out? Twiddle my thumbs?"

"Why don't you upgrade the security around here? I mean, muscle's cheap. Put a couple of security guards outside, and it'll at least give her pause when it comes to sending another crew over here to mess with your friends."

"Yeah. I guess I should add to our security cams, too. I have some pointing at the gunship, but I need one out here."

"Exactly." Hines stared into space for a minute and then nodded up the street. "Uniforms coming to pick up your prisoners. A couple of rookies I think are still pretty clean."

"Should you be talking like that?"

"Huh?"

"Don't your corporate overlords keep logs of your behavior?"

"Oh, yeah, right. I wish you were joking. I know a guy, though. He scrubs my PAI every week before the upload."

"They upload at a regular time?"

"Yeah, they don't know we know it, but let's just say they're a little too organized for their own good." He pulled his vape out of his breast pocket. "You mind?"

“Nah. Listen, I’m going to call a guy about getting some security here before everything closes tonight. Can you handle getting those guys out?”

“Not a problem. Here they come. Impound truck will be here in just a minute. We’ll get that van out of here, too.” He turned and waved in a sleek blue sedan with “Luna Security” printed in block letters down the side. Juliet went back into the hangar, past the van—stripped of its contents by Bennet and Aya—and up to the front of the gunship where the two were working and chatting under the nose gun.

“They’re taking away our prisoners.”

Bennet looked up from the gasket he was wriggling into place. “That all?”

“Figured out who’s behind ‘em, but Hines wants to do some sniffing around. Thinks they’re protected by someone in the department.”

He shrugged. “Makes sense.”

“Are they all corrupt?” Aya asked, idly rolling a bolt back and forth atop the gun housing, which Bennet had disassembled on an empty wooden crate.

“All the cops?”

“All the corpo secs. Are there any towns where they aren’t helping criminals?”

“I dunno, Aya,” Juliet sighed. “I’ve only been to a few cities, and it sure felt like the corruption was everywhere. Hines seems like a good guy, but he’s working his own angle.” The sounds of muffled grunts and conversation drifted through the hangar as the “uniforms” worked to load up their prisoners. “I’m going to hire some private security to watch over the hangar for a while. That all right with you two?”

Bennet nodded. “Probably makes sense. Wasn’t sure it was in the budget.”

“Can you take me to buy a gun?” Aya looked up at Juliet, her big yellow irises bright in the gloom, and Juliet’s initial impulse was to try to talk her out of it. Then she thought of Aya sitting there with Willis’s gun pressed against her skull, and she wondered how she’d feel if someone tried to tell her not to arm herself. Aya must have seen the conflict in her eyes because she pressed on, “It’s a dangerous world, Lucky! I didn’t like having no option but to stand there with my hands up while they punched Bennet!”

“Yeah, I’ll take you, but I’ll give you one of mine for now.”

“Just show her not to point it at me, please? Does this mean I should be wearing my pistol while I’m working?”

Juliet slapped him on the shoulder. “That’s up to you, big man. Like I said, I’m hiring some security, so only if it makes you feel better, yeah?”

“Right.” He went back to painstakingly threading a gasket into the main gun housing.

Juliet had Angel contact the company she'd used for security outside the *Wing's* hangar, and when she offered to pay double wages for the night, they agreed to send two guards over on short notice. Once that was arranged, she went to her room in the gunship and picked up her needler and two magazines filled with low-velocity "hush" rounds she'd picked up on one of her many shopping excursions. Shot through the gun's bulky suppressor, the only sound they'd make was a soft *click*. "Aya," she called, also picking up the paddle holster she'd bought for convenience. When the salvage tech didn't respond, she left the gunship and walked to the front where she'd last seen her working.

Bennet was still bolting up the housing, grunting as he turned the torque wrench; it was set to a specific tension so he wouldn't damage the gasket. "Where's Aya?"

"I think she's in your dream-rig. Something about shooting some zombies."

"Oh, brother." Juliet walked over to the rig and touched the "call user" button. A few seconds later, the rig clicked noisily and slid down, revealing Aya inside, blinking in the bright overhead lamps. "Hey."

"Hey." Aya frowned, and for some reason, Juliet thought it looked like she was about to cry.

"What's going on, Aya?"

"Just mad. Mad at being helpless. Mad at needing you to save me. Mad thinking there are creeps like that guy in the world."

"Yeah. It's enough to make a grown man cry, as my old work buddy, Mark, used to say." Juliet smiled, reaching down to take Aya's hand. "He was a funny guy, you know? I used to judge him harshly, but looking back, he was the real thing. He refused to smoke vapes because of the 'unknown' chemicals in them. Smoked old-fashioned, hand-rolled cigarettes. I think I thought of him just now because of the dream-rig. Oh, brother! He loved his dream-rig. Talked about it all the time. 'Sorry, boss, gotta clock out! Date with my dream-rig, if you ya know what I mean.'" Juliet laughed at the memory, trying to mimic Mark's voice, and Aya smiled, too, her eyes twinkling up at her.

"Well? Have you ever shot one of these?" She held up the needler.

"Only in sims."

"C'mon." Juliet pulled on her hand, helping her to sit up. "You're gonna love this little guy; he packs a punch, but he's silent and doesn't kick at all. Not with the rounds I've got loaded. If someone broke in here, you could shoot 'em and move, and no one would have a clue where the shot came from. Remember that: Always shoot and move. Shoot and move."

Juliet led Aya to the far side of the hangar, where the freshly painted, glossy, baby-blue hull panels were lined up, and pointed at a pair of empty pallets leaning against the far wall. "Put a few rounds into those pallets, so you know what it feels like. Does your PAI have a targeting program?"

"No . . ."

“Shoot!” Juliet laughed at her pun, shaking her head. “Don’t worry. I’ll grab the one I promised you from storage tomorrow.” She handed the needler to Aya, then said, “Just use the laser sight for now.” She tapped the little button on the side of the under-barrel laser, then pointed out the green dot currently high on the wall. Aya smiled and lowered the barrel until the dot was on the pallets. “Now gently squeeze the trigger.” Aya depressed the trigger, the gun went *click*, and a tiny puff of gas emitted from the barrel and drifted upward.

Aya frowned. “Is it jammed?”

“Nope! That’s what it sounds like. See the three needles in the pallet?” Juliet could see them clearly with her optics, but it took Aya a minute of staring before she grinned. “That’s it? I didn’t even feel it!”

“This is a suppressor.” Juliet touched the rectangular protrusion on the end of the barrel. “And those needler rounds are called ‘hush’ rounds. It’s a gimmicky name, but they really are quiet, yeah? Those needles are thin enough to slip through lots of different types of armor, but they won’t penetrate hard materials very far. If someone has armor plates, you know, like the ones on my combat armor, then shoot them in the neck or face or wherever you see just clothing and no armor. Also, those magazines hold thirty-six rounds, so don’t worry about firing a few times at someone.”

Juliet helped Aya with the holster, showing her how the flexible plastic paddle was meant to slide inside her waistband, keeping the gun secure against her hip. Aya twisted at the waist, left and right, and rested her hand on the gun’s grip. “It’s smaller than I thought it would be.”

“Looks good. You’ll get used to it being there, too.”

“Thanks, Lucky.”

“Hey, listen; I don’t want you to get yourself hurt just ‘cause you have this gun. If you’re not shooting to save yourself or someone like Bennet, then don’t shoot; just try to run. The best way you can deal with bad guys is to get safe and let me or one of the security guys deal with them. Promise?”

“Promise. Only if I have to.” Aya grabbed her into a hug, and for the first time in a while, Juliet felt Aya’s emotions bleeding through her perpetual effort to keep her nose out of her friends’ heads. She felt warmth and comfort and genuine happiness. Suddenly, Juliet felt an answering warmth in her chest, and she hugged her back, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head.

“I’d be wrecked if you got hurt, Aya.”

As she snuggled even closer, burying her face in Juliet’s chest, Aya mumbled, “Same. How do you think I feel all the time when you’re out doing the things you do?”

Juliet sighed, squeezed her one more time, then pushed her back so she could look at her face. “C’mon. Let’s watch a vid together, huh? I have an early morning.”

Bennet left after an hour or so, and Juliet and Aya hung out the rest of the night, snacking on leftovers and sharing a feed as they watched old zombie movies—Aya’s idea—until Juliet insisted she needed to sleep. When Aya left to collapse into her own bunk, Juliet made sure the

ship was locked up tight, then curled into her acceleration couch, determined to get some much-needed rest. Of course, that's when Angel decided it was time for a heart-to-heart.

"What makes some people feel like long-lost family while others are just acquaintances?"

"Huh?"

"Like Shiro—you like him, he likes you, you work together, but you wouldn't be hugging him, cuddling with him watching movies, sharing leftover spring rolls, or . . ."

"I get it. I don't know, Angel. Maybe it's that Aya wears her heart on her sleeve. I love that about her. She doesn't have a mean bone in her body, and it makes me want to, I dunno, hold her close against the cruel realities of the world. Have you noticed she hardly ever asks for anything and always goes out of her way to be nice or help? I don't mean with just me, either. She's so good to Bennet, and I don't know if he even realizes. She picks up after him, reminds him of what he's working on, and ensures we always get something he likes to eat when we go shopping. I've even seen her throwing his laundry in with hers. She treats him like a beloved big brother, and I get it; he's a good guy, but Aya is like that for everyone! I just . . . I love that about her, you know? She's the opposite of the greedy scumbags I have to deal with so often."

Angel was silent for a minute, and Juliet lay there, contemplating her flood of words, amazed, as usual, at how Angel had managed to broach a subject that Juliet had obviously been subconsciously ruminating on. "She's a wonderful person," Angel finally said. "Do you feel romantic toward her?"

"I . . ." Juliet's initial reaction was to deny anything, but this was Angel she was speaking to; why would she be dishonest with her? They shared, literally, everything. "I don't think so, exactly, but I definitely feel a kind of happy warmth in my chest when we're together. She doesn't, like, excite me that way, though. I don't feel a tingly, fluttery sensation like I used to whenever I let myself contemplate Nick that way. God! Why'd I let him go on that stupid damn mission? Why didn't I admit my attraction?" Juliet felt frustrated tears building up in her eyes, and she squeezed them shut, trying to force the image of Nick out of her mind.

"I'm sorry, Juliet. I felt horrible at Nick's loss, but I think it pales in comparison to the emotions you're going through." Angel's words gave Juliet a thought, and she turned the guns on her.

"Are you attracted to anyone?"

"Me?" Angel's voice betrayed genuine surprise, and Juliet grinned at her cleverness.

"Why not? You like people. You love people. Is there someone you feel romantic about?"

"When I first met you, I had feelings, but they were abstract, simple things compared to what I've experienced since merging with you. When we first came together, I cared about you because you were my host, and it was important to me that you succeed in every aspect of life. Now, I love you so desperately that the idea of you dying pulls a horrible gloom over my consciousness, and simple success metrics are almost like background noise. So, just as my feelings about you have grown profound through our connection, I also experience some of my emotions about others through that same connection. When Nick excited you, I felt that. When Aya fills you with warmth and cozy sensations, I feel that, too."

"If I try to separate the feelings I experience through you from the people we interact with, then things become more abstract and analytical again, and I'm able to concentrate on some of the things I like about people. For instance, I am impressed by Rutger Tanaka. It's rare to see people truly change, and he seems very different from the man he was when we first encountered him. I think that change, and knowing the other Rutger must be inside him somewhere, lends an air of mystery and danger to the man. Plus, he's very ruggedly handsome; his jawline is strong, his eyes are fierce, and . . ."

Angel continued to extoll Rutger's virtues, and Juliet found her mouth hanging open, her mind utterly dumbfounded. Was Angel really crushing on Rutger Tanaka? When Angel trailed off after describing how she found Rutger's desire to teach her endearing, Juliet struggled to speak without snark; she didn't want Angel to regret opening up. "Are you saying that of all the people we hang around with, Rutger is the most attractive to you?"

"The most? I'm not sure. You asked me if I was attracted to anyone, and he came to mind. He's so multifaceted . . ."

Juliet groaned and flopped over to her other side. She couldn't help the smile twisting the corner of her mouth, and she desperately wanted to tease Angel, but she fought against the urge, trying to find something to focus on that would make her sleepy. Finally, giving up, she said, "Please play one of the old episodes of *Roy and Ernesto*." It was a comedy about a pair of men struggling to run an ostrich farm in a Martian agridome. While she listened to the familiar old jokes and enjoyed the weird Martian scenery, she found her lids growing heavy, and Juliet didn't fight to stay awake.

The next day, Juliet dressed in gym clothes, put on her motorcycle jacket, and grabbed her monoblade. At 0800, before Aya had emerged from her bunk, she opened the bay doors to roll her bike out of the hangar. Her heart lurched, and she almost leaped into evasive action when she saw two men wearing black corpo-sec-style body armor outside the door. A second later, her brain registered that their vests bore a Charter Security logo, and she remembered she'd hired them the night before. "All quiet?" she asked, turning to close and lock the bay door.

"Yes, ma'am. Not a peep." The guy had a slightly southern twang, and she was reminded of Hot Mustard—talk about feelings of attraction! "Anything we should know?"

"Yeah. There'll be some people here working, but they have credentials. If anyone else, and I mean anyone, comes poking around, I want you to message me immediately. You have my contact info?"

"We do. You're Lucky, right?"

"That's right. And you?"

"Sending you my card. Handle's Ringer, and this is Big Bump." He jerked his thumb at his compatriot. Both men wore dark visors so that she couldn't see much of their faces, but she liked that Big Bump still had his eyes on the road, his hands holding his large AK-style rifle at the ready. They seemed pretty solid, based on a first impression.

"You on all day?"

"Until ten, then we swap out. Be back for the night shift again, though."

Juliet climbed onto her bike. “Nice. Well, be sure the shift change messages me when they start duty, all right? You heard about the hostilities we had here, yeah?”

“Yes. Don’t you worry—anyone tries getting into this hangar again, we’ll make enough noise to wake up half the city.”

“That’s what I like to hear, Ringer.” Juliet used a shrink-cord to attach the sword to the back of her seat, then touched the ignition, bringing the bike to life with its signature deep faux-engine rumble. She waved at Ringer and Big Bump and then sped away. It was time for a sword lesson with Angel’s crush.