

Juliet's new dress had threatened to make her bike an impractical transportation choice, but Aya had come to the rescue with some tight exercise shorts that covered Juliet down to mid-thigh. Wearing her high, faux-leather boots and Aya's shorts, when she hiked up her dress to mount the bike, the only skin she was showing was on her knees. Juliet was okay with that. As she motored away from the hangar, she wore her vintage motorcycle jacket, had her vibroblade tucked into her right boot, and, of course, her Texan was neatly stowed away under the seat.

"I'm glad you wore your jacket, but you're going to regret not having pants on if you get into an accident." Angel's last-ditch effort to caution her as she turned toward the dome access highway brought a smile out of Juliet.

"I know, I know. Honestly, I'm not sure why I wanted to get dressed up. I mean, considering who I'm meeting for dinner, but you know I don't dress like this often. I'll be careful."

"It's the other drivers I'm worried . . ."

"I know. Jeez, Mom!"

"I . . ."

"Oh, that was mean, wasn't it? I know you're not trying to be my mom, Angel." Juliet immediately felt like a jerk, especially considering her relationship with her mother, of which Angel knew every detail. Rather than backpedal further, she tried to spin things in a more positive direction. "I could only dream of a mom as good as you, you know that, right?"

"You think I'd make a good mother?"

"I'm not saying I want that from you—sister is just right for me. I know, for sure, that you'd be a wonderful mother, though. Like, if you were responsible for raising a little kid, that would be one very lucky kid. You feel?"

"Truly?"

"True-true, Angel." Juliet cranked the throttle and rocketed up the ramp to the domed highway, rushing past a slow-moving cargo van. Before Angel could get nervous or warn her again, she moved into the slow lane and relaxed her grip on the throttle, dropping down to the speed limit. She could almost feel Angel begin to relax as she settled into a slow, comfortable cruise toward the central Luna dome. Her map, highlighting her route, showed that she'd arrive at Bijou by Estelle—an apparently highly exclusive restaurant—in nineteen minutes. The restaurant was in the H&C Megacomplex, a massive plasteel and Diamatex building in the central downtown area.

The streets in the central business district of Luna City were almost exclusively devoted to the mass-transit trams, but there was a single lane for personal vehicles if the driver was willing to pay for the two hundred and fifty Sol-bit day-pass. When Juliet pulled up under the valet awning, a young man wearing a black suit hurried over and held out his hand as though he expected to help her get off the bike. Juliet didn't want to seem rude or frosty, so she took his fingers in hers and stood, swinging her leg over the bike and bending to, not so elegantly, pull her shimmering dress down over her shorts. "Thanks," she said, reaching up to pull her helmet off.

“What a nice bike!” the valet said, walking around to the other side, preparing to take her place on the bike.

“Hold on.” Juliet tapped a smooth, glossy section of paint just in front of the seat. “Touch your thumb here so I can give you valet permissions.” While he did that and Angel handled the hand-off, Juliet attached her helmet to its cradle. “No hot rodding! My PAI’s watching you.” She smiled and winked as he tried to stammer reassurances, then strode for the front doors where a similarly garbed door attendant waited.

As she approached, he pulled the door wide, “Welcome to H&C, ma’am. May I direct you to a particular suite?”

“Um, Bijou?”

“Ah, ground level, just to the left of the information kiosk.” He smiled as Juliet walked inside and added, “Enjoy your meal!”

Juliet felt very comfortable and confident in her new boots; she loved the way the ribbon-like laces, tied in bows near the top, shimmered faintly in the soft lighting of the lobby. She loved her new dress, thin and revealing as it was—something she’d never have worn back in her old life. Just as the saleswoman had promised, it refused to wrinkle, and it hung down to the tops of her boots, the silvery material picking up and taking to new levels the shimmer of their laces. Of course, she hadn’t taken her jacket off yet, and she wasn’t sure her confidence would survive that moment, but she had high hopes. Aya had certainly boosted her confidence with plenty of compliments when she was getting ready.

“You think my hairstyle survived the helmet?” she subvocalized as she crossed the posh, marble-floored lobby. It wasn’t a quiet space; the tower was home to many businesses and homes, but she could feel the money like an aura coming off the people walking around in their suits and dresses that made her a little self-conscious about her motorcycle jacket.

“Of course! Your Chroma Tresses are able to memorize up to three hairstyles.”

Juliet reached up and brushed some of her springy, wavy hair through her fingers—it certainly felt like it had held the curls. “I’ll take your word for it.”

When she entered the restaurant, passing between two weird but beautiful glass plants with holographic leaves, the suit-wearing maître d’ stepped out from around his station, quickly walking toward her. His polished shoes clicked on the marble as he stepped behind her and reached for her jacket. “I’ll check this for you, miss.”

“Um, thanks,” Juliet said, feeling a little awkward with the attention.

“A pleasure.” He bustled back around behind his station, handing Juliet’s coat off to another young man dressed just as finely as he, who carried it through a doorway off to Juliet’s left. “Now, may I have your name?”

“Go ahead,” Juliet subvocalized. She assumed Angel sent her details to the man’s PAI because his icy-blue retinas flickered with LEDs, and he smiled and nodded. “Very nice. Welcome to Bijou by Estelle! The other half of your party awaits. If you’ll follow this carpet,” he pointed at a

plush burgundy runner on the white marble flooring, “it will lead you to the elevator, and my colleague, Daniel, will take you up to the restaurant.”

Juliet nodded, a little thrown off balance. She supposed it made sense that an exclusive restaurant in one of the most exclusive buildings in the city wouldn't be on the ground floor. Forcing her shoulders back, standing tall, she walked down the carpet, trying to banish the sensation that she was practically naked in her slender, slinky dress with her arms and shoulders fully exposed. “What made me get a dress like this?” she muttered as she put some distance between herself and the entrance. She could see the elevator ahead—appropriately fancy-looking with gilded doors and soft amber lights, giving the wooden paneling a warm, luxurious glow.

“Hush, Juliet!” Angel said, of course, knowing exactly what to say, “You look amazing, and you've been wanting to wear something fancy for a long time! Now, put aside her murderous intentions and gravel-like voice, and think about if Lacy Blake would feel self-conscious about her clothing.”

Naturally, Angel's words made Juliet laugh, which did wonders to settle her nerves. When she strode into the elevator, she had a hard time not scowling and growling at the suit-wearing attendant, wondering how he'd react to the Lacy Blake treatment. He smiled, oblivious to her inner dialogue, and gestured to the old-fashioned bank of elevator buttons. “Welcome, ma'am. Just a moment, and we'll be at the restaurant.” He pressed the topmost button labeled “R,” and the elevator, despite looking like an antique, began to rush smoothly upward.

The ride, while brief, was fast, and Juliet felt her stomach do a little flip as the car slowed and came to a halt. The doors opened with a *ding*, and she saw the restaurant and had to fight to keep her mouth from falling open. A woman wearing a well-tailored, feminine version of the same suit the maître d' had been wearing was waiting for her. Hands clasped before her, she offered a slight bow and said, “Welcome, miss, to Bijou by Estelle. I'm Lucinda; please follow me to your table.” Juliet stepped off the elevator, still staring at the restaurant's interior.

They had to be on the tower's top floor because the ceiling and walls were all made up of a smooth, crystal-clear dome that gave an unfettered view of the city and, more importantly, the clear expanse of stars through the city's dome. It almost felt like the restaurant was floating through the night sky. Juliet had seen clear views of the stars before; she'd been in space quite a few times, after all, but it was something else to see dinner tables occupied by finely dressed guests sitting under such a perfectly clear view of the night sky. As she took a few steps out of the elevator, and the hostess guided her around the elevator, things only ramped up when she saw the other side of the restaurant and the enormous, glimmering blue and white jewel of Earth.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed, unable to maintain her stoicism.

“Something else, isn't it?” the hostess asked, turning to smile at her.

Juliet was so in awe of the view that she hardly noticed the people sitting at the tables they walked past. She looked at the young, finely dressed woman guiding her and said, “How?”

“Oh, you mean, how is it so much clearer up here than down on the street?” The woman winked a bright, magenta iris at her and said, “The magic of technology! The dome over this restaurant is enhancing the view, filtering the clouds and other interference.”

“Ah!” Suddenly, the spectacularly clear view of space made sense.

“Here we are,” Lucinda said, gesturing to a table right next to the glass dome. It was small, with only two seats, and Rutger Tanaka was standing next to one of the seats, watching her approach. He wore a slim-fitting black suit, a black shirt, and a shimmering red tie. He started to bow when she stepped up to the table but stopped himself as Juliet scowled.

“Hello,” he said, waiting for Juliet to sit down before taking his seat.

“I’ll be available should you need something. Your PAs have my contact info. Are you familiar with our dinner service?”

“Hai,” Tanaka said.

“Very good. Then you know your wine will be served shortly, and your first course will arrive shortly after that.”

Juliet wanted to ask if there wasn’t a menu, but she didn’t want to sound stupid. She just smiled and nodded, and then Lucinda walked away. Juliet was left alone with Tanaka and a view that somehow was more impressive than the one she’d had aboard the cruise liner when it orbited Earth. “Thank you for coming,” he said, shifting and looking even more awkward than Juliet felt. “You look very nice.”

Juliet frowned, suddenly regretting her demand that he take her somewhere nice. “I did this for me.”

“Yes.” He nodded as though it was a simple fact that he agreed with.

“I’d actually been hoping for a good bourbon. Do we have to have wine?” Juliet wasn’t sure why she said it; she’d be fine drinking wine, but she supposed a part of her was trying to keep from making things too easy on the man.

“No.” Tanaka’s eyes unfocused for a second, and then he added, “I canceled it and ordered drinks.”

“Thanks.” Juliet sighed, leaned back in the very comfortable, white, velvety cushioned chair, and stared at the planet where humanity had been born. “This view might be enhanced by the dome, but it still looks real. I can see the distance between us and the planet—the city out there, glimmering with neon, the cars and trams moving around. I can see the dome and lunar surface. It’s really mind-boggling.”

“Hai, I love it.”

“You say ‘hai’ a lot. I have a Japanese friend who does the same. You don’t use other Japanese words, though; is it just a habit?”

“I suppose.” Tanaka shrugged. “I haven’t been in Japanese territories for decades, and everyone speaks English for business. I don’t think about it, but yes, it must be a habit.”

Juliet decided she wanted to air some grievances and not sit there making small talk. “So, what’s the deal with you? What’s your deal with me? I get it; I hurt you really badly, but we’ve been over that; you were basically torturing me, and I knew you were going to kill me. I wasn’t there for any reason other than to rescue two innocent people.”

“Hai . . .” Tanaka frowned. “Yes, I know. I don’t hold you responsible; rather, I hold myself so. You . . .” he trailed off, and when Juliet continued to stare into his unsettling chrome eyes, he tried again. “I can’t explain what happened, but I feel like, over the years, I became a different man, one I do not now respect. You killed that man. I know,” he waved a hand in the air, “it’s a cliché; that person is dead, I’m a new person, and so on. I feel a fool saying it, and maybe it’s wrong, but it’s like a fog has been lifted from my mind, and I see myself clearly for the first time in decades. I see what I had become, and I am ashamed.”

Juliet stared at him, mulling over his words. It wasn’t the first time he’d said something like that; he was basically repeating what he’d said in the garage, if a bit more eloquently. She wondered what it would be like to linger on the brink of death for as long as he had, to wake up with half your body replaced. Had he even really been alive through all that? Had he been pulled back from some weird limbo? Frida seemed to think he was changed . . . “Why did Frida like you before? I mean, when you were a mean bastard willing to beat the snot out of a woman before killing her.” Her words fell out of her mouth, her thoughts about Frida triggering the pent-up question.

“Frida?” Tanaka frowned and looked away, staring through the crystal-like glass, his gaze distant, aimed beyond the city toward the distant planet. “I suppose if I’m sincere, I shouldn’t have secrets. If you own my life, then you own my past. Frida was a child I orphaned.”

Juliet didn’t think she could be shocked by this man, that there wasn’t anything he could say to surprise her, to disgust her more than her memory of him ruthlessly beating her. Somehow, he’d found a way. “Orphaned? You killed her parents?”

He scowled as his eyes devoured the view of Earth. He started to speak twice, stopping and reconsidering his words before finally simply saying, “Her parent, yes.”

Juliet felt a weird pressure in her head and a faint buzzing in her ears. She almost stood up and walked away, but something made her say, “You were such a sweet, curious little boy! How’d you turn into a monster?”

Tanaka’s face, what little she could see of the flesh beneath his many tattoos, blanched, and he leaned forward, his teeth clenched as he asked, “How? How do you know about my childhood? Are you a demon sent to torment me? An angel come to offer salvation?”

As he asked Juliet if she were an angel, in an uncanny coincidence, her own Angel spoke up, “Juliet, are you okay? The lattice is heating up, but nothing the implant can’t handle. Are you sure you should have said that?”

Juliet didn’t answer, but she wondered why the lattice was active. She hadn’t seen anything new. She hadn’t heard any voices. She wasn’t moving things around with her telekinesis. She was certainly feeling a lot, though, and again, her mouth started moving almost of its own accord, “It’s nothing like that, Tanaka. Maybe it’s fate that crossed our paths. Maybe it was just chance, but if it’s really changed you the way you insist . . .” Juliet trailed off. She wanted to say a lot more. She wanted to say that she felt something pulling her, making her words flow freely.

She wanted to say that maybe he could help her and she could help him. Still, her rational mind wouldn't let go; she was still traumatized by what he'd done to her, still horrified by the idea that he'd killed Frida's parents, and now she was working for him.

"You won't tell me? How you learned of my childhood? I thought everyone from that time in my life was dead." Before Juliet could answer, a smooth, chrome-bodied synth approached their table. It carried a tray with two crystal tumblers filled with amber liquid. Silently, it set one before Juliet and the other in front of Tanaka. Without a word or any discernable noise, it turned and walked away. Juliet looked at her glass, noting the big, round ice cube and the rich, dark fluid. She lifted it, smelled the heady aroma of whiskey, and then took a sip. It was a hundred times smoother than the last bourbon she'd sampled.

Sighing as the liquor warmed her throat and stomach, she said, "I'm not going to share any secrets with you right now. You're the one sharing secrets today. Tell me how Frida came to be your 'right-hand' woman."

Tanaka hadn't touched his drink, but he stared at it, shifting the glass left and right as he contemplated. Finally, he nodded briefly and began to speak, "When I was younger. Maybe a little younger than you, I was hired to infiltrate this woman's household and kill her." Tanaka pointed to the beautiful woman's face he had tattooed on his neck, just above his shirt collar. "I don't know how you can know I was once called Noraneko, but not that I am the man who assassinated the last heiress of the Takamoto Dynasty. Well, the last known heiress, in any case."