

“Are we talking about the same Tanaka?” Honey frowned and leaned back, pushing her plate away. “The guy who almost killed you? The one who held Lilia and me captive and made vague, scary fucking threats with that monoblade of his?” Juliet opened her mouth as if to respond, but nothing came out. She was searching for the right thing to say, but the only thought that kept rushing through her head was that Honey was right; it sounded crazy, and Juliet wished she could go back in time and not bring the subject up. “I don’t think you should go anywhere near that man.”

“He’s different,” Juliet was pleased that she’d finally managed to formulate a response, but it didn’t exactly sound erudite. She hurried to try to shore up the feeble objection, “I mean, I can’t describe it properly, but I reacted the same way at first. When his assistant came to propose a meeting, and I learned who she was, I shot her in the chest. God!” Juliet shook her head, the memory of her first encounter with Frida taking her by surprise—she hadn’t thought about it in a while, and the memory almost overwhelmed her with shame and then relief; what would she have done if she’d killed Frida? “I’m so lucky she was armored; I’d feel awful if she were dead because of me.”

“Oh yeah?” Honey’s earlier warmth was cooling, and, for the second time, Juliet wished she’d never brought Tanaka up.

“So, anyway, I agreed to a meeting after I calmed down, and I had every intention to take him out if he seemed like a threat. I even ambushed him in his parking garage. His response to me was,” Juliet paused, trying to think of the right words, “pathetic, I guess. You know, back on Titan, I almost killed him. *Did* kill him, if you listen to his story. He says he’s a different person now. Honey, I don’t want to get lost in the details here. The point is that he’s trying to change. He’s wanting to do something to help me, and, well, I could use the help.”

“You need sword lessons that bad? I told you I can train you!”

“No, no, I brought up the sword lessons with you ‘cause I think it would be a lot of fun for us, but I need different kinds of help from him. He’s seen a lot. You know I’ve got some ghosts in my past, some things I’m running from. I’d like to get out from under that shadow. I’d like to be able to move forward with my life, to enjoy my present, and plan a real future. I can’t do that if I’m always running.”

“You think he can help with that? He must have some serious connections.”

“He does! He’s been a high-end operator for a long time. He’s got a team, resources, and, as you said, connections.” Juliet looked down at her plate, picked up an olive, and bit off some of the meat, avoiding the pit. She savored the salty tang while she let her brain run around in circles. After a minute of frustrating silence, she locked eyes with Honey and said, “I agreed to the sword lessons because it will give me a chance to see more of him, to decide if I can trust him. I guess it was dumb to invite you, so forget it, all right? We can do something else.”

“Are you serious?” Honey scoffed, shaking her head. “You can’t drop something like that on me and then take it back. If I didn’t go with you, I wouldn’t get any sleep! I’d be tossing and turning, worrying about you. I’d be thinking about what a shitty friend I was, wondering if I’d ever hear from you again, and knowing it was all my fault if I didn’t!”

“Ugh, I’m such an idiot. You don’t have to worry about me. I didn’t invite you for protection.” Juliet couldn’t help the way her brows drew together in a scowl. “I can take care of myself.”

“Hey,” Honey said, her tone gentle, almost hesitant, “Hey, I know that? You saved me, remember? I’m not trying to say you’re stupid or helpless or anything else like that. I’m just saying I have a serious grudge against that guy, and I’m a little freaked out. That’s on him, though. I hope you know how badly I want to spar with that guy.” She laughed and reached over to grab Juliet’s wrist, squeezing. “I won’t be held responsible if I crack him on the wrist or knuckles with my practice sword!”

Juliet grinned, her dour expression instantly washed away by the idea of Honey making Tanaka cry out and drop his sword. “I’d love to see that!”

“Eh, I’m no master. He’ll probably make me look stupid for trying.” Honey bared her teeth in a fierce smile and rubbed her hands together. “I’m gonna try, though!”

“So you’re in? Yes!” Juliet glanced at her AUI and, seeing the time, added, “I have an appointment coming up. Gonna have to bail. Our first lesson is tomorrow morning; you good with that?”

“What? Leaving already?”

“Yeah, sorry. Seeing my cyber doc.” Juliet squeezed her hand open and closed as though to illustrate her point, but her cybernetic hand looked just as natural as her other one, kind of making the gesture strange and out of place.

“What time tomorrow? I have Lilia until nine . . .”

“Perfect! I’ll message Frida. Angel will send you the details, okay?”

“Frida? That’s his assistant?”

“Right.” Juliet stood up, and when Honey also stood, she grabbed her in another hug, pulling her close and pressing her cheek against her soft brown braids. “You don’t know how much it means to me to be able to talk to someone else about what I’m going through. I mean to have someone I can trust and who knows some things about my past. Thank you, Honey.”

Honey squeezed her back, and when they pulled apart, she said, “I owe you a lot, J.” When Juliet started to object, she hurried to add, “That’s not why I want to help or hang out with you; I’m just saying I’m sorry I haven’t always been there. I get caught up in my feelings and forget other people have ‘em, too, you know? I should have been . . .”

“I get it. That’s enough, all right? We’re good. See you tomorrow!” Juliet winked, then, trying to leave on a positive note, started toward the street and her waiting bike.

“Tomorrow, then!” Honey called after her.

Juliet’s good mood lasted through traffic and the struggle to find parking near Ladia’s. However, on her way from the garage to the clinic, Angel asked a question that brought her crashing back to reality. “Did you wonder if connecting Honey to Tanaka might open up some vulnerabilities?”

Juliet frowned and tried to consider the situation from angles she hadn’t thought of in the heat of the conversation and her spur-of-the-moment invitation. “I guess it might give him a clue about

my past. He knows I came from the Phoenix spaceport. He might find out Honey's from there . . .” She trailed off, irritated at having to look at something so seemingly harmless so critically. “I guess, if he really digs around, he might find out Honey used to work with an operator named January, which might lead him to Juliet. I'm not sure how, but I guess it's possible. Should I call it off?”

“I believe Tanaka is sincere in his desire to help you. Perhaps if he does begin to connect some dots, it will make it easier to ask him for real help. It will be good for you to have Honey around more. It will be good for her, too. All that said, I think you should proceed as planned. We have solid hooks in Tanaka's network, so I don't think he could do anything terribly surprising. If you're wondering, he's currently practicing with his sword in his new dojo. As the dojo is in his office suite, I have access to the cameras.”

“I wasn't wondering, but I guess that's a good sign. Maybe he's nervous about tomorrow.” Somehow, that thought brightened Juliet's mood again, and she was grinning as she stepped into the clinic lobby. When she approached the glass reception counter, she was glad to see Tricia was working. She thought back to her other visits and couldn't recall ever seeing a different receptionist. Somehow, it seemed appropriate. Ladia didn't seem like the type of doctor to keep an extensive support staff. She was choosy about her clients, and it made sense that she would be choosy about her employees. “Hi, Tricia.”

“Lucky! Welcome in. Dr. Ladia will be ready for you in just a minute. Can I get you something to drink? A refreshing spritzer? Something with a little something in it?” She smiled, her teeth dazzling between her rose-colored lips.

Juliet was tempted to say yes simply because she loved to see Tricia walk; she had an almost unearthly grace. Still, she shook her head. “No thanks. Just had lunch.” She turned and sat in one of Ladia's ridiculously comfortable lobby chairs.

She was so relaxed, her mind pleasantly occupied by the nearby holographic infomercial about RadTech “professional-grade” muscle enhancements, that she almost felt disappointed when Tricia stood up and said, “Lucky? Dr. Ladia is ready for you. You can head right back.”

Juliet went through the door Tricia held open and traversed the short hallway leading to Ladia's consultation office. When she walked in, the doctor stood from behind her desk and, smiling warmly, took Juliet's hand between hers, squeezing gently. “It's certainly nice to see you, Lucky. You're looking fantastic!” She turned Juliet's hand in hers, looking at her palm and gently manipulating her wrist. “Arm's still good? Any complaints?”

“Not at all. Everything's great.”

“Good, good. Sit down and we'll talk.” She gestured to one of the two chairs in front of her desk. Then she returned to her own seat.

Juliet sat, taking a deep breath of the lilac-scented air. She loved Ladia's office. “Yeah, about that, did you get the list from my PAI?”

“Your list of dalliances? Each bullet point put a needle through my heart!” She laughed and waved her hand in the air, dismissing her words. “I tease, I tease. No, I'm not sure how you got ahold of those Cybergen implants, but I'd have jumped on the bargain, too, were I you.” She tapped at something in the air, interacting with her AUI in the same outdated manner that

Juliet's mother used to do. "Let's see, Cybergen auditory, olfactory, lungs, and reflexes. Is that everything?"

"Well, everything you didn't know about."

"Pretty extensive; I'm glad you were in a good clinic. You didn't tell me which, though, and I was hoping to get a copy of your medical records."

"Oh," Juliet fidgeted in her chair, trying to get comfortable. It was the same kind of memory fabric as the one in the lobby, but it wasn't conforming as quickly to her body's shape. "I have my records. I'll send you the direct log from the surgery so you can see exactly what was done."

"I have everything prepared," Angel said. "I'll send it along."

"You should have the file; my PAI just put it through."

"Ah! There we are. Hmm, no clinic or doctor name?"

Juliet shrugged. "He's kind of a private guy—even choosier about his clients than you are."

"He?" Angel asked, a note of outrage in her voice. Juliet tried not to laugh, but her amusement must have shown because Ladia smiled also.

"Oh, I'm choosy, all right. Okay, not to worry. I can work with this. So? Did you just want me to evaluate the work you had done, or did you have something more to discuss with me?"

"Well, I have some Sol-bits burning a hole in my pocket, and I was thinking about getting a few . . . upgrades, I guess? I'm a little worried, though."

"Worried?" Ladia frowned and leaned back, crossing her long, designer-pant-clad legs, showing off the heels she wore; they probably cost as much as Juliet's new bike. Her tailored white doctor's coat fell open, revealing a classy, navy-blue blouse, the color of which brought out the cool tones in Ladia's green-brown eyes. Juliet envied her ease with luxurious clothing and, for the second time that day, felt underdressed and out of place.

"I'm worried that I'm getting too easy with replacing parts of my body. I've heard lots of stories, doc, and I know things are different than in the early days of cybernetics, but . . ."

"But you've heard about rejection, CDD, CAD, CD, PISD—I could go on, right? A dozen other disorders are attributed to cybernetics, but those are the big ones." Ladia's smile said the words her mouth didn't, something along the lines of people getting worked up over nothing. Juliet wasn't so sure, though. She recognized the abbreviations and understood at least one of them. CDD, or Cybernetic Disassociation Disorder, was the biggest bogeyman anti-cybernetic activists talked about—a condition in which an individual struggles to identify with their cybernetic parts, leading to a sense of disconnection between their mind and the implant. Apparently, the disorder manifested in a feeling of being trapped in an alien body, leading to identity crises and dissociative episodes.

"Um, doc, I know about CDD, but what are the others?"

“Oops! I guess I said too much. Listen, Lucky, these things are super rare, and you’ve already shown that your mind and body are very compatible with cybernetics. If you’re worried, though, we can talk about them. CAD is Cybernetic Augmentation Addiction. I don’t think you have that, but after we speak for a while today, I’ll let you know if I’m worried. CD is Cybernetic Depersonalization. It’s kind of the opposite of CDD. Someone with CD starts to think of themselves as more machine than person, and it’s a real thing; I had a very sweet client who sort of went sociopathic after a few too many implants. Even so, he’s my only one ever, and the percentage of the populace who suffers from CD is very, very small.”

“And PISD?”

“Post-Integration Stress Disorder. Very similar to PTSD but involving flashbacks, anxiety, and heightened stress responses as a result of invasive implant surgery. I don’t think you’re a candidate for this disorder, considering some of the major work you’ve had done. Don’t let me put words in your mouth, however. What do you think? Any of these disorders sound like something you’ve been experiencing?”

Juliet didn’t answer right away because as soon as Ladia described PISD, she began to think about how she’d woken, shaking, breathless, in a cold sweat on many occasions after dreaming about what Grave did to her. She’d relived that injection of nanites and the murderous pain she’d gone through as they constructed the GIPEL several times in her nightmares.

“Lucky?”

“Oh,” Juliet licked her lips, her mouth suddenly dry. “No, I don’t think so, doc, but is it cumulative? Will I start to have a higher chance of suffering from a disorder as I get more and more work done?” She turned her left hand, exposing the port for her data jack, and nervously rubbed it with her other thumb. “I feel like I’ve already done a lot to myself.”

“The biggest way to ensure success and happiness when it comes to multiple implants is to take it slowly. Give your mind and body a chance to get used to what you’ve done, to get used to who you are now. You had a lot of work done while you were out in the Jovian System, but nothing that caused you to question your identity, right? You’re used to auditory implants and the olfactory ones, well, they don’t do anything unless you want them to. Same with your lungs; you don’t notice them the same way you would some other less automatic augmentation. I’m not sure I agree with doing lungs and reflexes in the same session; it seems like an awful lot to put you through at once, but it looks like you came out all right. I won’t impugn your other doctor’s judgment.”

“I was very careful to ensure you had time to recover! Remember, we put in your new nanites first . . .”

“It’s okay, Angel,” Juliet subvocalized. “You were doing what I asked.”

Juliet tried to move the conversation away from her Cybergen implants. “What kinds of implants do you normally see causing the most trouble for people?”

“Things that alter people away from how they see themselves internally. As an extreme example, I’ve done work for people changing their gender and made some very happy clients, but if I did the same operation to a person who didn’t see themselves that way, it could trigger a severe reaction. I mean, obviously, right?” Ladia chuckled, shaking her head. “Imagine! On a

less obvious note, I've had a client who was set on getting chromed-out power arms, only to beg me to replace them with natural-looking arms a week later. Conversely, I have a client with four chrome limbs, a synthetic heart, and a nutrio-cell digestive replacement. He's happy as a clam." Ladia shrugged. "As I said, those complications are quite rare, especially with someone like you who's already proven to have excellent compatibility and resilience. It boils down to the fact that humans identify themselves with their body, even though we all kind of agree that we live up here." Ladia tapped her forehead. "These disorders all tie back to that, the importance of self."

Juliet nodded, frowning. Hearing Ladia talk about a person's internal image struck a chord with her. She liked her body. She wasn't conceited. In fact, most people said the opposite, even the woman sitting across from her. Still, Juliet liked how her legs and arms looked. She liked how tall she was, and she liked that she could run without having to worry about her breasts bouncing all over the place. She was comfortable in her skin and wanted to keep it that way. "So, going forward, just so you know, I'm interested in not making myself look . . . not like me." Juliet smiled crookedly and shook her head. "Sorry for the awkward wording. What I mean is that I want to make sure I always look like me."

"You mean your internal view of yourself? Because you already look a good deal different from when I first met you."

"Sure. I guess. I mean, I know my hair and eyes have changed. I know I'm healthier and stronger than I used to be. Shit, doc, I guess I'm saying that if I'm going to change, it should be in a way that I want."

"Of course, Lucky! Anything we do will be something you want. I'll never try to push something radical on you. What brought all this on? Is there something in particular you're interested in?"

"Yeah, I guess—a few things. For instance, I don't have to tell you I'm a lot faster with the Cybergen nerve job. If it comes down to a fight with a real maniac, geared-out, chromed killer, only my right arm is up for the fight, though. I can equalize things with a blade or a gun, but what if I'm caught with my pants down, so to speak? Juliet tapped her left arm, the flesh-and-blood one with the data jack implanted in her bone. "I've seen vids of people with weapons in their arms, weapons that weren't any more obtrusive than this data jack, something like a retractable blade."

"Ah! Of course! There's quite an industry in hidden cybernetic weapon implants. We'd probably have to move that data jack . . ."

"I need a better one, anyway."

"Well, in that case, how about I have Tricia bring us some wine, and we can peruse some catalogs. Is there anything else you want to look at today?"

Juliet settled back in her chair and winced as she remembered Frida lying on her back, groaning about how Juliet's armor-piercing, high-caliber pistol round had *dented* her chest. "Yeah, what can you tell me about subdermal armor?"