

“What are you going to do?” Juliet asked, slowing down and pulling up behind a cargo van, coasting in its wake so she could pay better attention to Hines.

“I gotta lay low. Gotta disappear for a while. I might need you to move around and be my eyes and ears for a little while. I can pay a fair contract wage.”

Juliet chuckled and *tsked*. “Things that bad, corpo-man? Don’t have a single friend you can trust? Must be cold behind those glass and plasteel walls.”

“Things are bad, yeah, but only ‘cause I didn’t kiss the right asses or take the right bribes. You gonna leave me hanging ‘cause I had a little bit of a conscience and got myself in over my head?”

“When you put it like that, how can my frosty heart not thaw a little?” Juliet smiled inside her helmet, savoring the moment when a corpo-sec officer came to her for help with corruption. “We’ve got this secure line. You can send me a contract, and I’ll probably sign it. Wanna tell me what you’re thinking? Want me to snoop on your friends? Break into the chop shop? Capture some thugs? What’s the game plan?”

“Contract first. I sort of trust you, but I’d rather we put your SOA rep on the line, too.”

“Well, I’ll be waiting. You got a place to hide?”

“Got a few. Made plenty of questionable acquaintances when I was on the beat.” He nodded, sniffed, then, staring into the camera, said, “Seriously, Lucky. Please don’t leave me hanging. Keep your schedule clear for the next few days.”

“Hey, I said I’d probably sign your contract but don’t start assuming I don’t already have stuff going on. I’ll figure out my schedule, though, copy?”

“Yeah. Copy.” He nodded tersely, then cut the line.

“It must be hard to have no one to trust.” Angel’s comment made Juliet’s stomach twist, and she goosed the throttle, jetting out of the slow lane around the van she’d been following.

“It would be awful.” She drove that way for a couple of minutes, just a bit faster than she should have been going, and when Angel didn’t say any more, she said, “I know I’m lucky to have you. I also feel sorry for Hines, but we have to remember that he’s not a kid—he’s been corpo-sec for a long time. He made that bed he’s lying in, so let’s not get too eager to fall all over ourselves helping him.”

“That’s a perspective I hadn’t considered. It’s interesting to think that the people we become are partly the sum of our actions. It makes the idea of trusting someone a little more intriguing to me, a little more scientific than a ‘feeling’ you might have.”

“Sure. I mean, you knew that, though! You have to consider a person’s history when thinking about how to interact with them. Aya, for instance, has never hurt a mouse. I’d trust her with just about anything.”

“But you didn’t know Aya before the day you first boarded the *Kowashi*. Are you being hyperbolic when you say she’s never hurt a mouse?”

"I guess. I mean, she didn't trust me when we first boarded. Don't you remember? She was pretty suspicious of me. I think that makes me trust her more, knowing I had to earn hers." Juliet laughed and shook her head. "What's the point of this? What are we talking about? Hines . . . I don't trust him yet, which is why I'm not dropping everything to run to his aid. He's got more to prove to me."

"And Tanaka?"

"Oof! You're really going to bring him up again? I said I'll try to be nicer on Monday, okay?"

"Okay, well, what about Leo? Will you meet him and the 'guys' this weekend?"

"Depends on the Hines situation, but yeah, I guess so." With that settled, Angel got quiet, and so did Juliet, letting her mind wander through the people in her life and savoring the good relationships as a kind of counterbalance to the frustration she'd been feeling with Tanaka and Applebaum. She stopped and did some shopping at a high-end market where she could pick up some pre-formed, seasoned burger patties made of high-quality Luna vat-grown protein. She'd said she'd cook for the crew, but not that she'd do anything fancy. Still, she bought a tray of veggies and dip, Aya's favorite kind of chips, and a variety of buns to satisfy their dietary needs—low carb for Bennet, no gluten for Shiro, and just lettuce wraps for Alice.

Back at the hangar, she fired up the new propane-powered grill she'd ordered a few days earlier. By the time the crew landed and made their way out to the hangar, she had the door open, the security guards were each eating a burger, and Juliet was sitting in a lawn chair drinking her second beer. They arrived in a rented van, and as Juliet stood, Aya burst out of the side door and ran over. "That smells good!"

Juliet assumed she was talking about the smoke billowing out of the grill. "That's right! Open flames for us! Don't tell corpo-sec, 'cause I think this is illegal in the industrial domes." She was a little buzzed and slurred one of her words, eliciting a giggle from Aya.

"More beer?"

"In the cooler." Juliet turned to the van, watching as Bennet hauled out his toolboxes and, walking with his shoulders and traps straining to burst out of his t-shirt, carried them into the hangar. Shiro carried another but offered her a quick wave as he walked by. "Hurry up, boys! Burgers are about to burn."

"I'll take a beer," Alice said, walking over.

"Aya . . ." Juliet started to say, but Aya had already returned from the cooler with a grip of beers in her hands. ". . . has one for you."

"Lovely," Alice took one and ripped the plastic top off. "Not bad, but I prefer a glass bottle."

"Well, we're on Luna, Alice, and I didn't think it was worth twenty bits a bottle to get glass . . ."

"Easy, Lucky! I'm not complaining." She drained half the squeezable beer container, then, sighing and burping, added, "I'm a little tired from the drop out of orbit—traffic around the port was nuts."

“No worries. It’s why I wanted to feed you guys. I know how tired you must be.” She lifted the grill lid, let out a delicious-smelling smoke, and flipped the burgers. “These are about ready.” She wasn’t a genius with timing or anything—Angel had been keeping tabs on the others and had given Juliet a minute-by-minute itinerary for their return.

“I’ll grab some plates.” Aya hurried over to the folding table Juliet had set up. When she returned, Juliet unloaded the burgers and stood back while the others loaded their plates with food. Juliet made a burger last, smiling to herself as she listened to the others talk.

“Did you see that asteroid rig taking off when we landed?” Bennet asked Shiro.

“Oh, I’m so glad to be back!” Aya gushed, taking a big bite and talking around it. “One more day of zero-g, and I was going to lose it!”

“I bet that asteroid rig has gravity gen! It was *huge*.” Bennet said before Shiro could answer the first question.

“Hai,” Shiro muttered as he worked to unfold another chair.

“I barely saw it. Too busy watching the traffic lanes. We almost got clipped. Did you guys know that? Some little jerk in a shuttle. He came within a meter—a *meter*—of hitting our port side waldo.”

As though she hadn’t spoken, Aya brought up a new subject, “Lucky, we got the drives and reactor off the *Red Betty*. Shiro already has a buyer lined up.”

“Oh yeah? That’s great. I mean, those are the hardest things to disassemble, right?”

“Yep. We got a great start.”

“Oh shit! That reminds me,” Bennet said. “How’d things go with the Reactor Safe guys?”

“I sent you the report.” Juliet grinned. “But if you want to hear it from an eyewitness, things went great. She’s purring like a kitten.”

“She?” Alice laughed. “We’re sure about that, huh? Have you guys thought of a name yet? Seems if she’s got a working reactor and rebuilt drives, she ought to have a name.”

Juliet could see Aya was bursting to tell them the name Juliet had come up with. The two of them had talked about it at great length during one of their late-night movie-watching sessions. Of course, Aya loved the idea the instant Juliet said it. Still, Juliet wanted to keep things under wraps a little longer. “Let’s not make any names official yet. I want her to be ready before we debut her and start broadcasting her ITM data. I feel like it will be good luck.” The ITM, or identity transmission module, would broadcast the ship’s name and identity number—something they had yet to purchase.

“Oh? So, you already have a name in mind, and we don’t get a say?” Alice raised one of her feathery red eyebrows.

“It’s a great name!” Aya said, squeezing some of her beer into her mouth.

“Hey, if she knows . . .” Bennet shook his head, leaving the rest of his complaint unvoiced.

Juliet tried to turn the conversation away from the idea that she’d already made the decision. “Do you guys really care? Any of you have an idea for a name?”

“No.” Shiro crunched up his beer pouch and pulled another out of his overall pocket.

“Nah.” Bennet shrugged, the matter dropped as far as he was concerned.

“I mean, I wouldn’t want it to be dumb, but I don’t have any ideas.” Alice laughed as she finished speaking and popped a couple of salty, vinegar-flavored potato chips into her mouth, wincing at the sourness.

“Okay, well, here’s the deal I’ll make you all. Before we make the name official, I’ll get everyone’s approval. If you think it’s dumb, we’ll change it, okay?” She mostly spoke to Alice, and when she nodded, smiling, Juliet sat back, pleased.

Shiro cleared his throat, and when everyone looked at him, he began to speak, reciting what felt like a prepared speech, which had Alice’s jaw hanging open after just a few words. “I’d like to thank you, Lucky, for this nice meal after a hard week’s work.” When he paused, Juliet started to say it was no big deal, but then he kept going. “More than that, I want to thank you for the opportunities you’ve brought our way in the last year. I haven’t worried about paying bills for the last few months, and, well, this is the first time in my life I could say that.” He held up his beer pouch in salute, and Juliet felt hot embarrassment creep up her neck as everyone turned to her, holding their drinks up. “To Lucky.”

“To Lucky!” everyone echoed.

Juliet laughed nervously, clearing her throat and shaking her head. “How’s that? You guys bust your tails off working all week, and I’m the one getting toasted? No, no, no. Thank you! Each of you has gone out of your way to be a good friend to me, and I can’t tell you how much that means. So, let’s call it even.” She held up her beer, and they all mimicked her. “To us, yeah?”

“To us!” Everyone laughed and drank.

Bennet jerked his thumb down the street to the corner of the building where one of Juliet’s two security guards stood. “Feel awkward having those guys hanging around all the time?”

“Not at all. Who do you think I was drinking and lifting weights with while you were gone?”

Bennet slapped a hand to his heart. “You wound me!”

“Easy to replace a muscle head, Bennet,” Aya laughed. “I bet those guys weren’t reading old books with you, right?” She sat in a foldable chair beside Juliet and, as she spoke, leaned close and rested her cheek on Juliet’s shoulder.

Juliet gently tousled her hair. “Not a chance.”

Bennet leaned toward Shiro, gesturing with his beer. “You see that, Shiro? This is the kind of thing that really builds my confidence ‘cause I know they wouldn’t treat me that way if they didn’t think I could take it.”

Shiro, back to his non-verbal norm, snorted and sipped his beer. Alice took the brief moment of quiet to speak, “Lucky, I know you’re helping out here, but the light’s starting to reveal itself at the end of this gunship tunnel. If you want some work in the meantime, I know people who’d pay to be escorted by a ship like the *Lady Hawk*. Could rack in a few bits while you’re waiting for Bennet and Aya to finish up with this big girl.” She pointed into the hangar toward the dark, looming shape of the gunship.

“Um, depending on how long it takes, that might be a good option down the road. For now, though, I kind of want to stay hands-on here. I have a few smaller things happening here in Luna, too—a small contract through SOA, and I’m trying to build up my non-gun-related combat skills.”

“She’s learning to fight with a sword.” Aya was, apparently, holding on to one too many secrets.

“And fighting crime in the industrial domes,” Bennet laughed.

“Thought that was what the guards were for?” Alice stood to retrieve another couple of beer pouches from the cooler.

Juliet sighed, leaning back, drumming her fingers on her sword hilt. It jutted between the chair’s arm and the ground, and she wondered if she’d get tangled up if she tried to stand too quickly. “That’s a bandaid. We need to get to the root of the problem . . .”

“We do, huh?” Alice snickered, cocking her eyebrow at Juliet again. “You know what?”

“What?” Juliet’s cheeks were still warm and a little flushed from the beer and Shiro’s uncharacteristic toast.

“You have a savior complex.”

“Oh, bull . . .”

“Hey, don’t say mean things tonight!” Aya cried, interrupting Juliet’s objection.

“What’s mean?” Alice sighed, sitting down. “I’m not saying it’s bad. I mean, your heart is in the right place, for sure. Just think of everything you’ve gotten up to since you met us, though.” She started listing things off on her fingers, “Dove into space to save Bennet, fought off way more pirates than your contract justified, rescued some stray girls, rescued your friend Honey, uh, what else . . .” From the look in her eyes, Juliet knew she was about to list something about Nick, but had thought better of it. She kind of trailed off, clearly regretting bringing the whole thing up, but Juliet couldn’t be mad at her, not right then, so she bailed her out.

“Eh, that’s what it looks like from the outside. If you knew what was happening in my head, you’d know I’m just a freakishly lucky dummy who wants to believe there’s some good in everyone’s heart.”

Alice smiled, relief in her eyes. “We love you that way. Maybe I had to list some things to remember that your ‘savior’ behavior is really just what it looks like when you meet someone who stands up for their beliefs in this messed up world.”

Juliet got quiet at that, uncomfortable with the praise but unable to formulate a clever diversion away from it. Bennet saved her when he pointed at her sword and said, “Is that your monoblade? Thought you weren’t going to wear that until you were . . .”

“Relax, big guy. This is a practice sword, and my new teacher is making me carry it everywhere. Gonna be embarrassing when someone challenges me to a duel.”

Bennet said something funny, getting a laugh out of Alice and Aya, but Juliet missed it because Angel projected a priority call window on her AUI and said, “Hines is calling, and he’s flagged the call as an emergency.”

Juliet stood abruptly, surprising herself by smoothly extricating herself and her sword from the folding chair. “Sorry, just a minute, guys. Someone’s calling.” She walked away from the door into the cool, dim alley. The security guard was ahead of her, currently patrolling down near the corner of the building. As soon as she’d stepped out of the light of the open bay doors, Angel connected the call, and Hine’s face resolved.

“Thanks for taking my call. You got a minute?” He looked to the side, and Juliet could see the stress in his eyes.

“I’m listening.”

“I’m sending a contract to you right now. One of the guys I thought I could trust just turned on me. I almost got raided in my safe house. He doesn’t know I know. I’m dumping my PAI and switching to a burner ID. I’ve got your contact info, so I’ll be in touch, but gotta really disappear for a while. I’m going to send you instructions with that contract. I think we should start with this traitor. I want you to get to him—figure out who’s pushing his buttons. Can’t believe the little asshole actually flipped. Practically raised the little punk.”

“You want me to ‘get to’ a corpo-sec officer?”

“Yeah. He messed up. I know everything about him, so it shouldn’t be too hard. Gonna send you everything you need.”

“I’ll look at it.” Juliet wanted to tell him that she wasn’t a hundred percent on board, that she had to think things through and see what kind of exposure she was looking at. He looked so rough, though—harried, red-eyed, sleep-deprived. She knew that feeling. He had no one to turn to, and, as Alice had helped her admit a minute ago, Juliet wanted to believe the best in people. “You’re not alone, Hines.”

That gave him pause, and he closed his eyes and took a deep, slow breath. “I needed to hear that, Lucky. Thank you. You help me get through this, and I won’t forget it.” His eyes widened, and he jerked his head to the left. He looked back at her a second later and said, “I gotta go. Contract’s on its way.” As the call window closed and Juliet clenched and unclenched her fists, wishing she could see Hines and know he was in the clear, Angel produced a new window with a standard SOA job posting and contract.

<b>Posting #</b>	L1788b	<b>Requested Role:</b>	Investigative	<b>Rep Level:</b>	D-S+
<b>Job Description:</b>	*Private until job completion* Investigate corruption in the Luna City Security Corporation in relation to ongoing thefts, robberies, and fencing of stolen goods in the various Luna City industrial domes.			<b>Compensation:</b>	10k weekly retainer with a potential bonus.
<b>Scavenge Rights:</b>	Exclusive	<b>Location:</b>	Luna City	<b>Date:</b>	August 4, 2108 - Ongoing

“He sent your first 10k payment with the contract.”

“What’s the ‘private until job completion’ note? Does that mean others won’t see I’m working this job?”

“Yes, that’s standard for corpo-sec jobs. He’s hiring you through his official capacity, so there’s a good chance he’s taking your pay out of his department budget.”

“Oh, that makes me feel better about the poor guy having to pay me. Also, I love the idea that Luna City Security is paying me to weed out some of their own corruption.” Juliet figured it also meant good things for a bonus—if she succeeded and Hines gained some clout in the department, he might be able to authorize a decent payday. “He send the details about his known traitor?”

“Yes. Evan Lopez. He’s given us his address and a schematic of his home security, with a caveat that Evan is likely to change or upgrade things if he realizes Hines is onto him. He also included Evan’s work schedule, his known acquaintances, and his usual pastimes and hangouts.”

“Sounds like he’s serving him up on a silver platter, huh? Makes me nervous. Is he working tonight?”

“He works the graveyard shift. His next day off is Tuesday.” Juliet looked back to her friends sitting around the grill, sipping their beer, laughing, and chatting. She supposed she could head out after midnight. Everyone would be gone or passed out by then. She cleared her throat, stooping to pull open the cooler as she passed. She plucked out a pouch of beer and asked, “Anyone ready for another?”

“Throw me a couple,” Bennet said, holding his hand up.

Juliet tossed him a single pouch and said, “Better take it slow. You owe me a bunch of workouts, and I’m claiming the first one tomorrow.”

“Oh, I do, do I?” He laughed and ripped the top off his pouch. “You know, after a week of zero-g, you might be able to keep up with me for once.”

“It does feel nice to be on solid ground, though,” Alice said, and Juliet saw the flush of alcohol on her cheeks and around her nose. Her eyes twinkled with amusement, and she looked absurdly happy leaning toward Shiro, holding his hand. She didn’t need to read minds to know who was getting lucky that night. Looking from Alice to Shiro, Bennet, and Aya, she felt very fortunate and wildly protective of them. Suddenly, she was sure she didn’t want them to meet

Applebaum and the others on Tanaka's team. She wanted to keep those worlds separate for as long as she could.

"How about some music?" she asked, tapping her AUI to pipe a playlist through Bennet's speaker hanging just inside the bay doors. As the relaxing twang of a melancholy synth-bluegrass melody began to play, a song she'd stolen from Hot Mustard a lifetime ago, Juliet sat there, enjoying her current friends and remembering the ones she'd lost.