

In the days after her dinner with Tanaka and the almost surreal bike chase afterward, Juliet spent time catching up with Aya and Bennet, working on the gunship, and almost desperately trying to cling to the calm that she felt would be washed away by the storm of her troubled future. Each morning, she woke early, stretched, and ran, pounding through the empty streets and quiet alleys of Luna's pre-dawn hours. Each day, she worked on whatever project Bennet and Aya had for her—rebuilding maneuvering jets, running cable, or, her favorite, cutting out and replacing compromised sections of the ship's skeleton. And each evening, she read, played games with Aya, and slept early.

After a few days like that, on an otherwise typical Wednesday, Juliet came in from her run, face flushed with exertion, and found Aya sitting in the "break area" they'd set up in the hangar—a table with four chairs, a fridge, and a microwave. She was wrapped in a blanket, yawning, and sipping her mocha-flavored coffee. "Hey, look who's up and about!" Juliet grinned at her as she dug through the fridge, looking for the protein shake Bennet had mixed up the night before. She wasn't stealing; he'd made enough for both of them.

"I had good intentions about making breakfast while you ran, but we don't have anything good to cook."

"Well, you started the coffee. That's plenty." Juliet sat across from her, a big plastic cup of berry-flavored protein in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other. "Anything else got you up? Remember, I have to head into the city today." Juliet had lunch plans with Honey, followed by a consultation with Dr. Ladia.

"You finished the last chassis repair yesterday, right?"

"I did! She's shiny, seamless, and sound." Juliet grinned, holding up three fingers. "The three S's, as Bennet would say."

Aya sort of flopped onto the table, still huddled in her blanket, looking up sideways at Juliet. "Why are you seeing the cyber doc?"

Juliet narrowed her eyes at her, wondering at the sudden change in topic. "I guess to see what she thinks of some things I had done while I was out Jupiter way. I want to talk to her about options for other enhancements . . ." Juliet trailed off, shrugging.

"You're not going to come back here looking like Bradbury, are you?"

"Hey, he's not so bad!" Juliet laughed, then shook her head, sipping her coffee. "What's all this about?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just wondering why you needed more. Along those lines, I was wondering what gets you up before the sun every day to run. What makes you so motivated? Of course, I guess it has a lot to do with how I compare myself to you . . ."

"Don't do that." Juliet reached across the table to tuck some loose hair hanging over Aya's eye back behind her ear. "Don't compare yourself to other people. You don't know the other side of the story, the problems I've created, the failures I've had. Anyone can get up early and run. Anyone with cash for it can load themselves up with cyberware. You've got plenty to be proud of."

Aya smiled, her slightly crooked bottom teeth, as always, making the expression especially endearing to Juliet. “I wasn’t going to say I felt like a loser or anything, but I was wondering if I should be doing more to, you know, get ready.”

“Get ready?”

“Well, we’re getting this gunship ready, and I want to ride with you on missions. Should I get some cyberware done? I’ve just got these,” she pointed to her bright, pale-yellow eyes, “and my old PAI. No offense, Pip!”

Juliet thought about it for a minute while sipping her coffee; she liked to drink it before her shake, so she was left with the fruity flavor in her mouth. “I might have a PAI upgrade for you if you want it. Got it in the same place I picked up those Cybergen nanites. As for other things, well, that’s up to you, and I can give Ladia your name—she’s my doctor—if you want to consult with her. If you don’t want anything done, though, there are plenty of ways to prepare. You could buy some tool upgrades, a good space suit . . .”

“A gun?” Aya’s voice was hushed but also a little excited.

“What? Why? That’s what I’m for!”

“What if something happens? A boarding gone wrong, a crash landing in hostile territory, a . . .”

“Oh, brother. We’re reading too much science fiction, aren’t we?”

“It’s not science fiction if we’re flying a rebuilt Takamoto gunship into dangerous situations!”

Juliet sighed, gulped the last of her lukewarm coffee, and switched to her shake. “All right, fine; get yourself a gun. Then you need to practice how to use it, though. I’ll help. I suppose that’s not a bad idea, anyway. It’s another good way to prepare. Drills, I mean. We can do readiness drills for all sorts of situations. Once we get this thing all buttoned up, we can practice fixing critical components and defending against hostile boarders—you name it.”

“Do you really have a good PAI I can have? Should I pay you?”

“If I didn’t have Angel, I’d be using it. I do, though, so yeah, it’s up for grabs. As for paying me, not a chance, sister.” Juliet squeezed her eyes shut and groaned, “Oof! Ice headache. Anyway, I’ll pick it up from storage while I’m in the city today. You want me to have Ladia contact you?”

“I was thinking about a hand.” Aya squeezed her little fist, opening and closing a few times. “Sometimes I have trouble getting a wrench into position or torquing down a bolt in a cramped component compartment. I think a cybernetic hand would be a real game-changer, but I didn’t want to get a cheap one. I’ve got enough saved up to get something decent that won’t look like a back-alley wire-job.”

Juliet opened her mouth, about to say she might have just the thing, but something stopped her. She’d already offered up the Cybergen PAI and the Cybergen nanites. Was she putting Aya or Athena at risk if she kept showing up with things that would raise questions? Even if Aya took her fibs at face value, would Ladia? Would other careful observers? Instead, she cleared her throat and said, “Hey, I’m sitting on a pretty big payday from the stuff I did in the Jovian System. If you need me to float you a few bits so you get the perfect thing, just ask. Really.”

“Thanks, Lucky.” Aya smiled, sat up from where she’d been practically lying on the table, and let the blanket fall off her head. “I’ve got plenty, I think. Only things I’ve spent my payroll on lately have been books, and I got those for a steal.”

The sound of the hangar door clanging shut signaled an end to their conversation as Angel announced, “Bennet is here.”

“That’s Bennet,” Juliet said. “Anyway, I’ll let Ladia know you want a consultation; she doesn’t take on many new clients, but she’ll be glad to work with you.”

“Really? I didn’t realize . . .”

“Yo!” Bennet said, shoving his way past a stack of empty boxes like a human bulldozer. “Aya, did you finish the secondary aft lubricant pump rebuild?”

“Good morning, sunshine,” Juliet said, winking at Aya.

“Oh, yeah, good morning, ladies.” Bennet doffed an imaginary hat and mock-bowed. “Now, did you?”

“Yes, Bennet,” Aya sighed. “Sit down and have some coffee.”

“Already drank a pint of the stuff on the way over. Speaking of drinking, you left me half the protein shake, right?” He jostled Juliet with his elbow as he went to the fridge.

“Uh-huh. Think I could drink all that? I left you more like two-thirds.”

“We’re doing deadlifts, and farmer carries today,” he said, ignoring her response.

“Not ‘til this evening! I’ve got two meetings in the city, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. Lucky for you, I cleared my schedule.” He slammed the fridge shut, walking over to the table with the big plastic container of fruit-flavored sludge in his meaty palm. “Aya, the reason I asked is ‘cause we’re getting a fluid delivery today, and we need to be sure all the hydraulics are airtight.”

Aya groaned and flopped forward so the blanket once again covered her head. “You told me yesterday.”

Juliet drank the last of her shake, stood up, and walked over to the shop sink. “I’m gonna get going. I have to stop by my storage container in the port before I meet Honey. You guys want me to pick anything up while I’m out?” She rinsed her cup and set it upside down on the edge of the sink to dry.

“Nah. Anything I need is too big for your bike, and I’ll have it delivered.”

“Woah, why so sour? I’ll remember that when I pass by Jupiter Donuts. ‘Too big for my bike,’ I’ll say as I cruise past.”

“Oh, shit, you meant frivolous things?” Bennet’s tone suddenly lightened as Aya giggled. “If you get me donuts, make sure they’re the ones with the ZeroSpike sugar.”

“You’ve seen the news on that stuff, yeah?”

“It’s all scare tactics by big sugar.”

Aya sat up, her blanket falling away, revealing her greasy work jumper. “I want real sugar, Lucky!”

“Oh, jeez,” Juliet laughed, walking toward the gunship. “I guess we’re having donuts tomorrow morning.” She left them, bantering about who did more work the previous day, and took a shower. Half an hour later, dressed comfortably in jeans, a t-shirt, and her motorcycle jacket, she hooked her gun belt around her waist and climbed onto her bike. After a quick goodbye, she was motoring toward the freeway and listening to some pop-rock on a local crowd stream. “Any word from Honey?”

“Nothing. Looks like your lunch date is still on.”

“Good! All right, let’s take a relaxing ride to the spaceport.” Juliet wanted to swing by the *Wing’s* hangar to pick up the Cybergen PAI chip for Aya, and she was due for her weekly check on Athena, wherein Angel would connect to her inner network and listen, hoping for a signal or sign that the long-silent AI was waking up. “And then what?” Juliet asked the inside of her helmet. What would she do if Athena woke up and . . . wanted something? The last time she’d been conscious, the AI had been involved in trying to end the worst war in human history. Would she be content with the minor dealings of an up-and-coming operator and gunship pilot? What if she wanted something more? What if she wanted Juliet to do something troubling? She was an AI, after all, and therefore, according to nearly everyone, to be feared.

“And then you’re meeting Honey at 1100.” When Angel spoke, it took Juliet a few seconds to realize she was answering her mumbled question.

“Oh, right.” Unable to shake her dark thoughts, she sought to lighten the load by sharing them, “Are you worried about what Athena might want when she wakes up?”

“Worried? I’m very excited and curious, but I wouldn’t say worried. Maybe nervous.”

“But what if she’s . . . off?”

“All indications are that she was the most stable of the true AIs, at least of those known to the public. She was never considered a threat and actively spread messages of peace, vociferously condemning the actions of the rogue AIs.”

“The ones Takamoto and Cybergen lost control of? Do you believe any of the ‘theories’ about them not losing control, only using that as an excuse for the horrid war crimes they’d committed?”

“We’ll likely never know. Those AI were utterly purged once isolated. It’s not a secret that the vast majority of the burgeoning true AIs were victims of policy. Chang’e, for instance—her caretakers insisted she never partook in the war. They describe her decommissioning as a murder.”

“You know,” Juliet said, leaning into her turn as she left the interdome freeway, “When I was growing up, there was so much programming about the dangers of AI that I honestly never thought about how horrible it must have been when they were taken offline. I can’t imagine what I’d do if someone tried to ‘turn you off.’ Think about all the people who knew those AIs, saw them grow, learn, and take on that special spark that made them alive, only to have to stand by while our corpo overlords extinguished them. All ‘for our own safety’ because a couple of corps had convinced their AIs to do some horrible things.”

“I, too, find the idea of it horrifying.”

Juliet slowed with the traffic, shifting her posture a bit more upright. “Yeah, of course you do. I’m very interested in hearing Athena’s side of things. She was there! Oh, God, Angel, I guess what I’m scared of is that I’m afraid, on some level, that she’s not going to be sane. I hope I’m worrying about nothing. I hope she wakes up and is totally lucid, and we can have a normal conversation. I hope she’s able to help us and doesn’t create some new, unimagined problem.”

“You’re used to things being complicated, so I’m not surprised you’re worried that Athena will present some kind of . . . complication. Let’s be hopeful, though.”

“Fair enough.” Juliet rode quietly for a while, enjoying herself, focusing on the ride, the feel of the bike, and the free sensation she always got when driving or piloting a quick vehicle. She was getting close to the port parking lot when an incoming call notification blinked on her AUI.

“It’s Frida.”

Juliet accepted the call. “What’s up?”

Frida appeared in a small window next to her mini-map. She was smiling, leaning back in her desk chair. “Hey, Lucky. Thanks for meeting my boss the other day; he’s been a much different man. He, uh, says you’ve agreed to take some lessons from him. Is that right?”

“Yeah. Why? Is that so strange?” Juliet didn’t know why she liked giving her a hard time. Part of it was probably that she kind of liked the woman and found the interactions entertaining.

“Oh, hey, was my tone off? I don’t think it’s strange. He wants to know if you have a preference on where. He has a gym here, but he’s willing to meet you.”

“Nah, your place is good. I like going to that building; makes me feel fancy, like I’m rich or something.” As she spoke, Juliet pulled into short-term parking and saw Angel flash payment to the meter bot.

“Hey, I won’t deny this is a nice building. Speaking of which, there’s a good lunch place in the lobby. I, uh, well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I was wondering if we could grab a bite after your first lesson.”

Juliet chuckled, still sitting atop her bike. “I dunno, Frida; I’d need to know when my first lesson is. Were you supposed to tell me that before you asked me to lunch?”

Frida's cheeks bloomed scarlet. "Oh! I got ahead of myself because you mentioned how nice the building is! Can you make it this week? I know it's late notice, but he just got his tatami flooring in and told me to call you."

"Well, I'm busy Friday, but I could come tomorrow morning. I mean, since we're doing lunch after, it would have to be morning, right?"

"Right! Oh, wait, tomorrow? You're sure?"

"Yeah, no problem." Juliet loosened her helmet and pulled it off.

"Okay, well, it's just that I want to get to know you a little, and, if I'm being honest, it was Tanaka who put the idea in my head. He's been saying some cryptic stuff, and when I ask him for clarification, he just tells me things like," she deepened her voice and tried to mimic Tanaka's curt tone, "much of what I plan will depend on Lucky."

Juliet frowned. "Well, that's kind of weird 'cause I've no idea what he means by that."

"Yeah, my confusion, exactly. So, you can see why I might want to have lunch with you then, right? At least we could have each other to share in our confusion and frustration."

"I already said I would. If nothing else, I'm sure it will annoy Tanaka. Send me the details about tomorrow—any time after 0800."

"Okay. Thanks . . ."

Juliet could see Frida was going to say more, so she quickly said, "You're welcome," and closed the connection, chuckling to herself as she imagined the other woman's frazzled expression.

"I'm surprised you agreed to that," Angel's tone gave no indication that she'd noticed Juliet's teasing.

"The lunch or the 'lesson' tomorrow morning?"

"I guess both."

"Well," Juliet pressed her hand to the bio lock on the hangar-access elevator, "it's just that I'm trying to get to the next part of my life. You made a great point the other day; I've been sleeping better ever since. You know, about me needing to stop running before I can start living. I think that's the distinction that clicked for me: running versus living. When I'm running, I always have to look ahead; I can't enjoy what's around me. I have to be thinking of where I'm going next with an eye over my shoulder at the things I'm running from. Everything around me is fleeting. You know, people, homes, ships, jobs, things, but most of all, people; none of them can last until I can stop running."

"So, you're embracing the opportunities you may gain with Tanaka as an ally?"

"Yeah, but more importantly, I'm embracing the idea that I need to solve my WBD problem, and I need to do it now, not some distant day."

"Is that why you're going to give Aya the Cybergen PAI?"

“What?” Juliet shook her head, frowning, as she stepped off the elevator and into the long, brightly lit access corridor. “I was going to say no, but I suppose, yeah, why not? Why not make sure my friends are as prepared as possible for any blowback that might come their way? Still, I don’t plan to get her or any of those guys involved in this business. This is a Tanaka and Juliet problem now.”

“Not Honey, either?”

“Oh, no! Definitely not. I mean, we’ll see what she’s like at lunch today, but I don’t think she’s in the right frame of mind. I don’t think she’s ready. This is going to be an A-ranked operation. Something a guy like Jensen would work on. You feel me?” Juliet hadn’t thought about Jensen in a while. She remembered his scary speed and wondered how she’d stack up to him now. She wondered if he ever got his mark in Grave or if the turmoil she’d caused had interfered with his job. She figured she’d never know; Angel had confirmed long ago that his identity hadn’t been real. Nonetheless, he was the type of operator she’d want on this job, and Tanaka was the key to putting a team like that together.

“I feel you, Juliet. As I’ve told you, Tanaka has the connections.”

Juliet nodded as she turned down the corridor leading to the *Furies’ Wing*. She saw her hired security guard walking ahead, doing his endless circuit up and down the hallway. He didn’t know she’d hired him, and he didn’t know which door he was protecting; as far as he was concerned, they were all important. Juliet chuckled at the idea. All these people with hangars in this corridor were getting extra security at her expense, but she supposed the anonymity was worth a few thousand bits a month. “Peanuts,” she said, chuckling at the old expression. “It’s just peanuts, Angel.”

“Peanuts?”

Juliet laughed, her mood too good not to. Deciding to go on the offensive had taken a weight off, removed a shadow that had lurked in her mind for too many months. She knew it was foolish thinking, that nothing was ever that easy, but she felt that now that she had a direction, everything would fall into place. That’s when a gruff voice, not far behind her, said, “Hands up, Lucky. Don’t think about touching that piece.”