

As Rutger Tanaka's words registered in Juliet's brain, she sat there, stunned, for several seconds, grasping at the implications. Was he saying Frida was some kind of secret scion of the Takamoto family? While part of her mind tried desperately to remember all she'd learned about the Cybergen-Takamoto war and the aftermath, another part reeled with the understanding that Rutger had just told her something that she could use against him or, more importantly, against Frida, whom he seemed to care a lot about. Her eyes darted to the corner of her AUI to check the status of her wireless connection—she wasn't being jammed, but the icon indicating they were in a noise-canceling field gave her some relief.

Finally, she found her voice, "That's a risky thing to say in a public place."

"These tables are private, and I paid good money to ensure the staff are vigilant for spies." Tanaka's face didn't betray any emotion, nor did his calm, steady voice. He took his first sip of his drink and, with no indication that he enjoyed it, set the glass back down.

Juliet stared hard at the tattoo on Rutger's neck. It was very detailed, almost photo-realistic. She could see individual strands of the woman's dark hair, a glint in her light-brown eyes, and the faint blush on her high cheekbones. If that was really a depiction of some long-dead Takamoto woman, she'd been very beautiful. "Frida doesn't seem like . . ." she trailed off, not wanting to sound provincial or narrow-minded.

"Do I seem like a Rutger? My mother was Dutch. In any case, these days, it's easy to change one's appearance."

"I think I need to hear more of the story, Rutger." The name felt strange on her tongue; Juliet had gotten used to thinking of the man before her as Tanaka, somehow distancing herself from his personhood. Saying his first name was enough to make her look down into her glass of bourbon, feeling a little strange, almost intimidated, by the intimacy of it.

"If you know I was Noraneko, you know Master Kazuhiro took me in as an orphan and trained me to fight. In exchange for the life he gave me, the Yamashiro Syndicate, for whom he worked, owned me. After the war, Yamashiro stood to gain much from the dismantling of Takamoto. The Takamoto real estate holdings, or at least a large percentage of them, were awarded to the family heirs who weren't directly complicit in the war-time activities of the corporation. Yamashiro wanted those lands and spent decades threatening, buying, and killing for them. When I was seventeen, I was sent to seek work as security for one of the last holdouts—Rin Takamoto." Rutger, again, tapped a finger on his tattoo.

"So you were supposed to get close and kill her? Why? She wouldn't sell the lands?"

"That's right." Rutger took another sip of his drink. "Must you hear the details of my betrayal?"

Juliet frowned, the question striking a chord within her. Did she? Wasn't it enough that he'd admitted such a thing? Wasn't it enough that he recognized it as a betrayal? She felt like they weren't close enough for her to want to hear anything more intimate. Instead, she pursued the part that interested her. "Why doesn't anyone know about Frida?"

"Rin was reclusive. She went through her pregnancy and gave birth in seclusion." Rutger shrugged and added, with a grimace, "Only synths and a few people she trusted were allowed on her compound."

“And you killed her and took her child?” Juliet shook her head, unable to keep the disgust from her voice.

“There’s more to it . . .”

“I don’t want to know more. Not now. Tell me this: Does Frida know?”

Rutger shook his head. “If she did, she would be at risk. If Yamashiro knew she lived, that she had a legal claim to what they gained . . .”

“They’d kill her.”

“Hai, and me.”

“Do they still own you?”

“No. I bought my contract years ago.”

“Wait,” Juliet said, something just now registering, “You were sent to infiltrate her security when you were seventeen, but were ‘around my age’ when you killed her? How long were you undercover?”

“I was with her family security for six years.” Rutger sighed and shook his head. “Have you heard enough? Has my shame satisfied your . . .”

“Oh, no! Don’t try to turn this on me. I simply asked, if you’re so different now, why did Frida care about you before, when you weren’t such a changed man? You’re the one who decided to confess your sins.” Juliet looked toward the exit, suddenly feeling like leaving. Why did she want anything to do with this guy? As if she could read her mind, or perhaps just noticing the direction of Juliet’s stare, Angel spoke into the silence.

“Juliet, if what he told you is true, you have incredible leverage on this man. There’s even more reason to consider seeking his help with WBD; I can’t imagine you would be able to gain such trust from anyone else you hired.”

Juliet looked at the frowning, dour-faced man across from her, noting the many fine, barely visible scars on his cheeks and the backs of his hands. He was a man who’d seen a lot, that was certain. She couldn’t argue with Angel’s logic, either. Did she have to like Rutger Tanaka to use him? After she’d been staring at him for several seconds, he finally started to speak.

“I raised Frida like a daughter. When she was old enough to understand such things, I told her I’d adopted her when a colleague died. It was easy enough to fabricate her dead parents; in my line of work, friends die frequently. So, even at my worst, when I was a ruthless mercenary, she saw me at home or in the office, where I let her work as my assistant, handling client relations. I wasn’t the same person there that I was on the job. Perhaps that can explain why even a monster can have the love of a child.”

“And you sent her to Jupiter to look for me? She wasn’t exactly ready for that, was she?”

“I . . . haven’t been myself since our encounter on Titan. I hired a man to watch over her . . .”

“Yeah, not the smoothest operator.” Juliet shook her head, sighing, then sipped her drink. She looked around, noticing none of the neighboring tables were occupied, and then it dawned on her that they should have had their ‘first course’ by then. “Did you cancel the food?”

“I delayed it.”

“Well, I’m hungry. Can you get things moving again?”

For the first time in her experience, Juliet saw Tanaka’s lips twist into, if not a smile, a less dour expression. “Hai.”

“While we wait, tell me what you think this looks like.” Juliet gestured to him and then to herself. “What do you want?”

“I want to help you. I want to help myself. I feel lost in here.” He touched his forehead, then moved his hand down to his chest. “And in here.” He frowned and glanced to his left at the silent synth approaching with a tray. “When I finished my job and took Frida, Noraneko died. You killed the man he became, and now I want to figure out who is living in here.” Again, he tapped his forehead.

Before Juliet could think of a response, the synth approached the table and silently placed plates before them. She was about to ask Angel what the food was, but then it spoke, in a smooth, cultured, androgynous tone, “Here we have our amuse-bouche, petite escargot pearls served on a light, crispy wafer. The escargot is sustainably farmed in our own aquaponic systems, ensuring freshness and quality. You’ll find the escargot accompanied by a garnish of aeroponically grown micro-herbs.” What that, the synth turned and walked away.

Juliet looked at her plate—it was a tiny amount of food, and though she knew escargot was a fancy way of saying snail, she couldn’t see any sign of the little creatures. The “pearls” were just round, slightly oily-looking balls on a cracker. Still, when she took a bite, the taste was rich, earthy, and a nice contrast to the delicate crispness of the wafer. Before she knew it, the little plate of food was gone, and she wanted more. Looking up, she saw Tanaka watching her, only half his food eaten. “You don’t like it?”

“I like it, but my appetite fails me.” He pushed his plate toward her. “You should eat it.”

Juliet frowned. Did she want to take food from this man? She figured she already was; he’d brought her to dinner. If nothing else, she’d get a good meal out of him. While she finished his portion, he began to speak again, “Do you have any interest in learning to use the sword you took from me?”

Juliet swallowed and frowned at him. “What makes you think I don’t know how already?”

“Because you carry a pistol wherever you go. If you’d mastered that blade, you’d not want to part with it.”

“Huh. You think so? I get that the monoblade is versatile and deadly, but I can shoot someone from fifty meters away with my Texan.”

Tanaka grunted and shook his head. “You’d have to be in an open field to kill me with that weapon. I don’t stand around in fields waiting for my enemies.”

Juliet shrugged. "I had you dead to rights in the parking garage."

He mimicked her earlier words, "You think so?" Tanaka grinned, showing Juliet what he really looked like when he smiled. She wasn't sure if she wanted to shiver or slap him.

"Don't try to rewrite history, Rutger. You were on your knees, weeping." Juliet almost regretted the words when she said them, but not quite. Even so, she felt a little twist in her gut when his grin fell away, and he stood up.

"Excuse me." Without waiting for a response or further explanation, he turned and walked away from the table.

"Huh, did I piss him off enough to walk out?"

"I'm not sure. He's walking toward the elevators, but the restrooms are also in that direction." Angel sounded a little uncertain when she asked, "Will you be upset if he's left?"

"No." Juliet's response was immediate, but she knew she wasn't being honest. Angel did, too.

"You're always concerned about what people think of you, even those whom you don't like." After a slight pause, she asked, "Do you like him?"

"No! In fact, I want to hate him, but it annoys me that I kind of feel sorry for him. He's a murderer, by his own admission. Frida thinks he rescued her from some horrible fate, but he took her mother and stole her life."

"You didn't listen to his entire tale. It seems there's more to it than the end result. Perhaps he was leveraged. Perhaps if he hadn't taken Frida, she would have been killed. Perhaps . . ."

"Angel, what are you doing?" Juliet was genuinely puzzled. "Are you trying to make me like him for some reason?"

"I don't know. I suppose, like you, I feel sorry for him for some reason. I've been researching the Takamoto family, and, it's like he says, Rin Takamoto was the last one with any inheritance rights, and between 2063 and her death in 2082, nearly every direct relation to the central Takamoto family died—more than a hundred and fifty people dead from accidents, suicide, or murder."

"So, what? Her days were numbered, so it was okay for this guy to kill her and take her kid?"

Before Angel could reply, the synth returned with an identical-looking partner. One took away their plates, and the other set down steaming bowls of soup. "Here we have forest mushroom velouté with heritage carrot essence. Our mushrooms are cultivated in-house in our specialized growth chambers for optimal flavor. The carrots are grown in nutrient-rich vertical farms run by the owner's sister in Luna's premier agridome. Please enjoy." As the synth walked away, Juliet looked at the creamy soup, savoring the aromas wafting off it.

"Tanaka is returning," Angel said, and Juliet looked to her right to see him walking stiffly through the dining room toward the table.

Sitting down, he said, “Thank you for not leaving. I apologize for my embarrassing outburst.”

Juliet snorted. “That was an outburst?”

Tanaka shook his head but didn’t reply. Instead, he sniffed the soup and smiled. “Mushrooms?”

“Yeah, and, um, carrots, I think.” Juliet tasted a spoonful of the soup and smiled, swallowing the smooth, somehow deeply comforting liquid. It was subtly sweet, with a depth of savory flavor that lingered on her tastebuds long after she’d swallowed. “Wow. Best mushroom soup I’ve tasted.”

“Better than ration packs,” Tanaka said, nodding.

“So, if you want to try working together,” Juliet said, swallowing another bite, “how do you feel about telling Frida the truth?”

Tanaka froze, his spoon midway between his bowl and his mouth, and set it down. He looked at her, eyes filled with emotion, and said, in a hoarse whisper, “Don’t make me do that. No, I cannot do that, not to her.”

Juliet sighed, also setting down her spoon. “Yeah, I guess I can’t be sure knowing the truth would be good for her. I want to do what’s right, you see? I feel sorry for you now, but I hate the idea of what you must have been to do what you did. Still, if the truth would hurt her more than help her, I can’t see making you tell her. It’s something I’ll need to figure out as I get to know her better.”

“Perhaps, if you’d let me, it would help for you to know my story a little better. To know what Rin meant to me. To know what Frida means to me.”

Juliet took another bite of her soup, savoring the rich flavor, and then nodded, somehow feeling more open to the idea than when he’d tried to tell her earlier. “All right. I’m listening.”

“Well, the relevant parts start when I’d just turned twenty-one and the man in charge of Takamoto household security, Franz Nachtmann, called me into his office . . .”

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Rutger straightened his suit, examining himself in the mirror. His hair was neat, cut so short on the sides he could see the skin. His only tattoo, the kanji he’d taken when Master Kazuhiro had given him his sword—senshi, or fighter—the only mark on his face. He traced his fingers over the ten-centimeter script under his right cheekbone. It had long ago healed, and he’d gotten used to it, but he hoped it wouldn’t affect his chances. He hoped Nachtmann wouldn’t be put off by the facial tattoo. He’d seen the bodyguards on the other family details, and they were all very clean-cut.

He checked his obi, made sure every fold was right, that his sword was seated perfectly, then walked out of the bathroom, his polished dress boots clicking on the porcelain tile. When he walked through the hallways of the estate, he made eye contact with the other security personnel, saw on his red, monochrome AUI that they were pinging his credentials, and continued on his way, secure in his right to be there. His PAI, Nora, guided him up the stairs,

down the third hallway on the left, and then to the nondescript, plain white door with a simple designation imprinted on a black placard—Takamoto Head of Security.

He stood before the door, perfectly still, and waited. He had no doubt the man within knew he was there. He waited six minutes and forty-two seconds before it opened, and a large, blond-haired man sitting behind a clutter-free glass desk said, in a gruff, thick accent, “Come in.” Rutger stepped through the door and over the plush, navy-blue carpet to stand before the desk. He bowed deeply and then straightened, waiting to be acknowledged. Behind Franz Nachtmann, expansive windows gave a view of the park-like front garden of the estate, and Rutger found his eyes drawn to the young man playing with a pair of vizslas, throwing a ball for them on the manicured lawn.

Nachtmann said his name slowly, enunciating each syllable, “Rutger Tanaka.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, you’ve been with the family for four years now, hmm?”

“Nearly. Forty-five months, sir.”

“Working on the grounds of properties waiting for sale, yes?”

“Mostly, sir. I’ve done a few details for the Sugimoto branch of the family, but nothing longer than a week.”

Nachtmann looked Rutger up and down, his eyes fixing on the sword at his side. “Traditionalist, eh? Your supervisor, Kramer, says you’re good with that weapon. Says you have a high-end wire job. Pretty fast, huh?”

Rutger nodded, preparing his lie, “Yes, sir. When my father died, I inherited a small estate. It wasn’t enough to live on, but when I sold it, it was enough for me to purchase the nerve enhancement to help start my career in personal security.” Of course, the truth was that Yamashiro had paid for his very high-end augmentation. How else would he impress this security detail enough to put him on a family detail?

“Smart. Many young men would’ve pissed it away.” Nachtmann nodded, mumbling to himself while he read through something on his AUI. “Well, I think you’ve put in your dues. How’d you like a steady position, one where you won’t be moving from detail to detail every other week?”

Tanaka bowed and, as he straightened, said, “Hai! I would be honored, sir!”

“Have you heard of Lady Rin Takamoto?”

Rutger knew he couldn’t feign total ignorance. Still, it was a struggle to keep the smile off his face. “Yes, sir.” He nodded, hands at his sides, struggling not to bow again—some of the Western security officers were bothered by the gesture.

“She’s a bit of a recluse, so you’re going to be away from town, away from the bars and whatnot. That said, you’ll be five days on and two off, working twenty-four-hour shifts. On your off days, you can go into Niseko to blow off steam. We keep a villa for the security detail there, so you’ll have a place to bunk when you’re not working. Sound okay to you?”

“Hai! Of course, sir.”

“Right answer. All right, get your shit together, ‘cause we’re shipping you off at 0430. Dismissed.”

Tanaka, struggling to contain his joy, turned on his heel and walked out of the office. Not until the door clicked behind him and he was well on his way to the staircase did he allow his happiness to reflect on his face in the form of a tiny, partial smile. Finally, after four long years, he was going to see her, the woman Master Kazuhiro told him needed to die.