

"I dunno, Fred," Juliet said, looking at the sleek, angular "pearlescent" blue bike. "I like the simplicity, but something about the Neptune GT really appealed to me. Is it overkill, though?"

Fred smiled and tugged on the lapel of his stylish, caramel-colored blazer. He was an immaculately dressed man, Juliet couldn't deny. His jacket was impeccably cut, his shirt fit him like a glove, not a wrinkle in sight, and his polished leather shoes shone in the soft lighting on the sales floor. "Isn't anything overkill on Luna? If you're going to buy something like one of these bikes, you're not doing it because you've got a two-thousand-kilometer road trip ahead of you. You're doing it because you like the bike and want to make a statement. This is a great choice, but the Neptune's on another level."

He turned and walked to the other side of the showroom floor where the Hydro Rush branded "Neptune GTs" were lined up. The colors were something else—diamond white, electric blue, magma red, and opal black. As Fred had explained, the paint was smart; it shimmered in any sort of light, adjusting its reflective qualities automatically or through manual control via the rider's PAI. Juliet liked how they looked, her eyes especially drawn to the powerful hydrogen combustion cells that sat beneath the high-density battery bank. She walked over to the black one, admiring the shimmering, hidden sparkles in the depths of the high-tech paint, and squatted to better look at the engine.

"I like the idea of a real engine, you know? It doesn't matter to me that I'll probably be running on the batts ninety percent of the time here on Luna."

"If nothing else, it'll save you having to charge the thing. Plus, pumping hydrogen is a hundred times faster than waiting for the batts to charge."

"And the cell can charge the batts?"

"Easily. A full tank will get you three full charges." Fred must have figured her out the minute she came through the door because he kept saying the right things. "This bike's too fast for Luna, you know. I guess, if you drive outside the domes, on the big access roads, you could open her up, but you'll run out of road before you get much fun out of it. Of course, if you were being practical, you'd be down the street looking at ChungHo's scooters."

"Seventy k, huh?" Juliet exhaled noisily as she stood up, shaking her head. "I dunno, Fred." She was playing him a little, but part of her was balking at the idea of spending so much money on something that was, when it came down to it, frivolous. If she wanted independence from the cabs and mass transit on Luna, she could, as Fred mentioned, buy a nice, brand-new scooter for less than five k.

"Small price to have the coolest ride on Luna, wouldn't you say?" He eyed her thoughtfully while she admired the sleek lines of the bike's frame, running her fingertips along the silky-smooth paint. "You like the opal paint? We've got a matching helmet I could probably throw in. I mean, you realize they can all change their colors, yeah? If it's the price, we offer financing."

Juliet narrowed her eyes and peered up at Fred. She stood up and stepped over the bike, straddling it and feeling its heft as she tilted it side to side. It was a big, heavy bike—much more robust than anything she'd ever driven. It might have intimidated her once, but not now, not after having flown ships like the *Lady Hawk*. "Are you reading my mind, Fred?"

"Hmm? You like the idea of financing?"

“No, not that. The helmet. How’d you know I wasn’t going to leave without a matching helmet?”

An hour later, after sitting with Fred and his manager to digitally sign the paperwork for the sale and waiting for his service department to get the bike ready for her, Juliet stepped out of the dealership toward the curb where her new opal-black Hydro Rush, Neptune GT sat waiting for her. She was still three meters away when it rumbled to life, the faux engine noises throaty and deep. Indigo underglow lights, visible despite the bright daytime cycle on Luna, illuminated the road beneath it, and the hard polymer shell that covered the seat slid into its housing, revealing the luxurious, black smart-gel cushion.

Juliet picked up the shiny, full-visored helmet and pulled it on, smiling at the way the smart-gel lining hugged and gently squeezed her scalp as it found the perfect pressure. She didn’t have to strap it on; the gel snugly gripped the base of her skull, all the way to the underside of her jaw. It wouldn’t come off until she touched the release button. She straddled the bike, and if it had been a person, she probably would have slapped it for the way it gripped her butt. She leaned forward to grab the handlebars, and then, with a click of the shifter and a twist of the throttle, she launched herself onto the roadway, humming past a couple of cabs with a stomach-flipping surge of speed.

“Careful, Juliet!” Angel cried as she rapidly approached the end of the frontage road and a blinking red traffic light. Juliet didn’t reply, but a wild giggle emerged as she put the bike’s powerful braking system to the test. She wasn’t disappointed.

“It’s so fun!” she laughed while waiting for the signal to change. “I didn’t think I’d feel the acceleration the way I used to, not after all that time in the cockpit. The thrill is still there, though!” That began an exhilarating hour of riding around Luna. She cruised through town, enjoying the looks people gave her and the bike as she wove between cabs and trams. Then, she spent time flying up and down the long, straight access roads that ran between and around the edges of the domes. According to her AUI, by the time she pulled up in front of the dress shop Angel had picked out, she’d amassed seventeen speeding tickets and 2,349 bits worth of fines.

Juliet almost saw the tickets as a scorecard; Angel was spoofing her ID and that of her bike, constantly changing who the scanners and cameras thought she was, so she wouldn’t have to worry about paying them. “Only seventeen?”

“Juliet, despite me masking your ID, if someone were to monitor those cams, they’d see it was the same rider being flagged over and over. It creates a layer of risk that you would probably be wise to avoid.”

Juliet sighed, Angel’s disapproval taking some of the shine off her fun. She supposed she was right—despite the massive database of fake identities she’d constructed with bits and pieces of real ones, there was the chance that her faceless silhouette could be picked out as the same person with multiple IDs. “I won’t do that all the time, Angel. It’s not like I’m the only person out there speeding or faking my traffic ID. You saw those guys racing their custom roadsters out by Elysium Heights. There are tens of thousands of rich folks who just pay their fines and ignore the laws on Luna.”

“It’s true, the data gathered from the traffic cams is immense, and there’s a tremendous amount of noise to get lost in, but it’s still a risk.”

Juliet sighed and nodded. "I just wanted to let loose a little, okay?"

"I understand. I believe it was good for your state of mind."

"I agree!" Juliet laughed, her face flushed with the fun of her ride as she pulled the helmet off her head and set it into the locking, custom clasp on the bike's rear fender. When she walked away, the motorcycle powered down, and the hard polymer shell rolled out over her seat. She stepped up to the glass door of the boutique, pulled it open, and, as a chime sounded *ding ding*, stepped inside.

The inside of the shop was filled with racks of all manner of dresses. The scents of vanilla and sugar hung heavy in the air, and soft pop music played on hidden speakers. A young woman walked out from behind a glass, jewelry-filled counter and, spreading her rose-red lips into a broad smile, said, "How can I help you, ma'am?"

"I believe you're holding a dress for me. I ordered it earlier today. Lucky."

"Ah, of course! The Silver Siren Halter Dress by Evelina Kwon, right? What a wonderful choice. We've ensured the measurements are exactly as you specified." She stepped behind the counter and began sliding tagged garment bags on a rack until she pulled one off, a slender, almost empty-looking, gray bag that she gently draped over the counter. "Would you like to try it on?"

"No thanks. I trust the measurements." She knew Angel wouldn't mess something like that up. Juliet glanced out the window at her bike waiting by the curb and said, rather sheepishly, "Is it going to wrinkle easily? I have to fold the bag . . ."

"No, the intelligent microfiber blend is impossible to crease." Her eyes followed Juliet's gaze, looking toward the window. "Is that your motorcycle?"

"Yep!"

The saleswoman's smile broadened as she leaned on the counter to see through the door more easily. She tucked a strand of dark, carefully curled hair behind her ear when she looked back at Juliet. "That's quite a vehicle. I bet it's fast."

"Yeah!" Juliet would be lying if she tried to deny enjoying the attention. She walked up to the counter and lifted the garment bag. "You sure this isn't empty?"

"No, but there isn't much to that dress. Not sure I could pull off a look like that. What kind of shoes will you wear with it?"

"Promise you won't laugh?" Juliet smiled, locking eyes with her as she gently folded the dress bag into thirds.

"Why would I laugh? Of course not!"

"Well, I ordered some boots; they're being delivered as we speak. They're knee-high with inch-thick soles, shiny black synth-leather, and ribbon laces."

“Oh my . . .” The woman looked like she was struggling to find the right words, second-guessing her initial response. “I mean, well, I think you’ll pull it off! I couldn’t, for sure. It all depends on confidence, and I think you’ve got it. You should!”

“Well, you’re sweet but also a salesperson, so I have to take your words with a grain of salt. Let’s just say you earned your commission.” Juliet grinned as Angel displayed the bill for the dress—2740 Sol-bits. She subvocalized, “Add a generous tip.”

“Will do.” Angel quickly added, “You just received a message from Honey.”

“Welp, I’ve gotta get going. Thanks for this.” Juliet held up the garment bag as she strode toward the door.

“I hope you come again!” the girl called after her as she stepped outside. A grin tugged at Juliet’s lips as her motorcycle rumbled to life at her approach. She pressed her thumb to the bio-lock under her seat, and it swung open, revealing a surprisingly capacious storage compartment. She folded the garment bag one more time and then tucked it into the space. After snapping the seat back into place, she hopped onto the bike and began motoring toward the dome’s edge, following Angel’s highlighted route back to the hangar.

Once she’d cleared the traffic of downtown and was cruising on the long straight highway toward the industrial dome and the gunship’s hangar, she said, “Play me Honey’s message.” A small window appeared in the corner of her AUI, and within it was a clear image of Honey’s face.

“J! I’m so glad you’re back, sis! I’m looking forward to lunch or . . . I was thinking maybe we could join a gym together or something. What do you think? I’d like to try to find something we can do together regularly. You know? Like the old days when we went to the dojo almost every day. I miss that! I called Sensei the other day—would you believe Charity’s his assistant now? How can so much change in so little time? I don’t even feel like the same person anymore. Do you? Gosh! Listen to me, blabbing out all my thoughts like I’m in therapy. That’s what I need, though, you know? I need to talk to somebody I believe cares about me. Seeing a therapist has been great, but I need my sis back! I’m sending my calendar to Angel. Pick a day, and we’ll get lunch so we can talk, yeah? Love you.”

“Wow! What a different tone coming from her, don’t you think?” Juliet leaned to the right and tweaked the throttle, blasting past a slow-moving freight truck.

“She sounds very upbeat. However, I feel troubled by her message.”

“What?” Juliet was surprised—usually, she was the one feeling something was off, and Angel was the one missing it. “I missed something?”

“It’s just that I’m not sure what to think about Charity being an assistant at the dojo. Do you think she’s got the right temperament? What if she takes advantage of Sensei?”

Juliet laughed. “Oh my God, Angel! You had me scared for a minute. Don’t worry about Sensei; he can see right through any of Charity’s schemes. He probably gave her the job to help her ‘grow as a person’ or something like that.”

The rest of her ride back to the hangar, Juliet and Angel reminisced about the dojo, the many people they'd met there, the various conflicts and dramas, and how much they'd like to catch up with some of them, especially Sensei. Juliet wrapped up the conversation as she rolled her bike through the partially open bay door, saying, "He'd be mad at me, though. I haven't really practiced his style of martial arts at all. Maybe that's something we could do with Honey—remind me when we meet to bring it up."

"Will do." Angel might have said more, but Bennet poked his head out from around a stack of open crates and destroyed any chance of a calm conversation as he whistled and started toward her.

"What's this? Look at that beauty!"

"Bennet, I thought we were happy with a platonic relationship." Juliet mock-preened, holding her fingers under her chin and jutting out her hip.

"Hah, good one. It's clear I'm talking about this little lady, though." He completely ignored Juliet and squatted beside the Neptune GT. When he reached to caress the sleek casing over the battery pack, the bike, quite literally, growled at him and flashed its indigo underglow lights into a pattern that spelled out "HANDS OFF" on the concrete floor. Juliet laughed, loving the default security settings. "Sheesh!" Bennet stood up and continued to walk around the bike, ogling every angle.

Juliet popped open the seat cargo compartment and pulled out her garment bag. "I'd tell you to get a room, but she's underage, creep!"

"What?" Bennet cried. "That's just cruel, Lucky. You can't put limitations on love like that."

"I just got this beauty off the sales floor. Let me enjoy her a while before you start trying to get romantic."

Juliet and Bennet were grinning at their absurd banter, but Aya wasn't amused as she came around the corner, her face smudged with grease. "You guys are weirding me out with that stuff. Makes me think I need to call someone to protect that poor motorcycle." She hurried forward, and her scowl turned to a smile as she grabbed Juliet into a hug. "I was wondering if you were coming in today!"

"Well, you didn't message me, did you?" When Aya just shrugged, Juliet patted at her coat, reaching into the pocket to retrieve the plastic container holding the sample from the medical ship's nanite membrane. "I was getting this for Bennet, and then I got distracted shopping." As she handed the dish to him, she added, "I'll call this a day off, but I'll make it up to you guys over the weekend. How's that sound?"

Bennet's eyes and brain were still glued to Juliet's bike. "Sounds fine to me as long as I can take this thing for a spin."

Aya turned her attention to Bennet and the object of his desire. "I don't want to drive it, but can you give me a ride?"

"Sure," Juliet and Bennet both said.

“She means me!” Juliet laughed. “Do you even know how to ride a bike, Bennet?”

“Of course! You think I grew up in some kind of NeoAmish commune?”

Juliet punched him in the shoulder. “Uh, you told me where you grew up, and I don’t remember motorcycles in that story.”

“Oh, right, well . . .”

“Relax. You can borrow it sometime, but not yet.” Juliet stepped away from the bike and looked around at the cluttered warehouse floor. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a dinner date to get ready for. I should have a package . . .”

“Here!” Aya ran over to the pedestrian door and picked up a cardboard box, just big enough to be the likely container of her new boots. “What’s in it?”

“Boots!” Juliet held out her arm, and Aya tucked the box under it. “Come on. Take a break; you can help me get ready.”

“I’m getting lunch then.” Bennet sighed and slapped his hands against his overalls, throwing a cloud of gray dust into the air. Juliet frowned, watching it drift toward her perfectly clean, brand-new motorcycle, but then, in a shower of tiny popping sparks, the active dust control system zapped the particles into submission. “Holy shit!” Bennet crowed. “I gotta see that again!”

“Come on, Aya, she can take care of herself.” Juliet started for the rear of the gunship, Aya in tow.

“What are you going to name her?” she asked as more sizzling pops erupted from the motorcycle.

“Good question. Let’s think of a cool name . . .”

“Wait! Who are you going to dinner with?” Bennet called, interrupting her.

Juliet paused and turned back toward him. “Sadly, it’s just a business dinner. Speaking of business, when are Alice and Shiro supposed to be back? I was wondering when they’d start work on the *Red Betty*.”

Bennet nodded, leaning against a tower of five-gallon lubricant buckets. “Supposed to be back next Friday. I mean next week, not in two days.”

“Roger. I suppose they’ll pull you guys away to work on it?”

“Just Aya.”

“Yeah, just me.” Aya practically pouted.

“Well, you’re the salvage tech.” Bennet shrugged and jerked his thumb toward the door. “Going for Ramen.”

Juliet waved, and she and Aya climbed the ramp into the gunship. Aya said, somewhat out of the blue, “Is it good or bad? I mean your business dinner.”

“Neither. It’s kind of a long story, but I’ll tell you about it if you want. Wait; did I ever tell you about the facility where I rescued Honey back on Titan?”

Aya slowed to allow Juliet to walk ahead of her through the narrow central corridor on the gunship. “No, you always changed the subject.”

“Right, well, it wasn’t a fun memory—still isn’t, but it’s more distant now, and this person I’m meeting, well, confronting him has helped me to get past those emotions. Anyway,” she said as she ducked through the hatch into her quarters, laying out her garment bag on the acceleration couch and setting the boot box onto the little desk so she could open it, “the guy I’m meeting was involved in that. He was hired to protect that facility.”

“Really? Did you have to trick him?” While Aya spoke, Juliet pulled open the box and smiled as she lifted out one of the boots. The synth-leather was supple and shiny, the thick, rubbery soles looked like they’d be very comfortable, and the smell of the new boots was so rich that even Aya leaned forward and sniffed. “Those are the coolest boots I’ve ever seen!”

“You’re so positive! I love that about you, Aya. Um, no, I didn’t trick this guy, but we fought. I thought I’d killed him. Wait, let me back up. So, you know my monoblade? It all started when . . .”