

Tanaka paused his story as the synths returned, one to take away their bowls and spoons, the other to deliver their third course. As he placed the plate before her, some kind of steaming protein accompanied by a bunch of vegetables, the scent of herbs, and rich fats made her mouth begin to water. “For your main course, we present our herb-crust, lab-cultured lamb. Accompanying the lamb, we have a selection of chef-picked seasonal vegetables—heirloom carrots, roasted to perfection, rainbow chard, lightly sautéed, and tender, baby asparagus, lightly grilled. Enjoy.”

The synths walked away, and Juliet leaned close to her plate, letting the aromas tease her taste buds. Then she looked up at Tanaka. “I don’t want to be rude, Rutger. I’m really trying to be patient and understand what’s happening here, but I’m having trouble understanding why I should stick around and listen to your life story. Can we skip to the punchline? I get it; you were young and impressionable when the Yamashiro Syndicate took you in. You thought you were saving the world or something, yeah? So, what—you worked for years to get accepted into Rin Takamoto’s security detail, then waited until she was alone and killed her? Took her baby with you ‘cause you felt guilty. Am I close?”

Tanaka frowned, slicing a small bite of the lab-grown lamb and chewing it while he contemplated. He swallowed, took another sip of his bourbon, then shrugged. “The punchline? I suppose the punchline is that Frida is my child. Rin killed herself, and I took credit for her death to earn credit toward my freedom.”

Juliet stared at him for several long seconds, her mind trying to wrap itself around the convoluted story. “Why, then, does she think you took her in when some ‘friends’ died? Why not raise her as your daughter?”

“Then I would have to lie about her mother. I would have to . . .” He stopped and slowly pressed a palm to his forehead, closing his eyes. Juliet knew that if she were listening to his thoughts right then, she’d be struck with some harrowing emotions. “It was better this way. I am not a father. I am . . . I was a killer. I wasn’t released from Yamashiro immediately, but the successful mission earned me much goodwill. Still, I had to work for years, and I did other dangerous work in those years. It was better for Frida to grow up thinking I was a kind family friend paying for her nanny and providing a home. It was also easier to explain her to the people in Yamashiro who handled me.”

Juliet took a bite of her food, wanting to enjoy it but too preoccupied with her thoughts to pay attention to the flavors. Her mind insisted on wandering in different directions. She kept thinking about Frida, imagining her life growing up with this man as a role model. She wondered about Rutger and Rin. Part of her wanted to listen to his thoughts to see if he was telling the truth; another part was scared—if he was telling the truth, those memories had to be horribly painful. She was torn between relief, sympathy, and guilt over the story. Part of her had wanted to think Rutger was a cold-blooded killer, had wanted to have that reason to walk away and put this weird interlude behind her. Now, she’d lost that leverage on herself, and the other part of her, the one who wanted to understand him, was gaining ground.

Finally, after she’d eaten half her food, and Rutger took a couple more small bites, she nodded, sipping her drink. “I’m sorry, Rutger. That sounds awful, and I suppose it explains a lot—why Frida cares about you, why I should stay out of it when it comes to telling her who she is, and why I should maybe hear you out when it comes to us.” She gestured to him and then back to herself, still holding her glass. When he didn’t respond, she tried to bring the conversation back

on track, back toward some kind of point. “So? What does that look like? What do you want from me, Rutger?”

“As I said, I want to help you and, in doing so, help myself.”

Juliet made air quotes, “Help?” She frowned, set her silverware down, and leaned back in her chair. “With what?”

“You’re hiding. Lucky, the SOA operative, doesn’t have much history, and I can’t find much of anything else on you—who you were before you were Lucky, where you came from . . . nothing. I have extensive resources and spent a lot of time and money looking into you. The only thing I know is that you arrived here on Luna last year on a shuttle from the Phoenix Space Port. You used a fake identity when you purchased your ticket, and I couldn’t trace you further. So, let me help you. I know what it means to always look over your shoulder, feel the weight of assassins or spies lurking in every window, and wonder if everyone you meet is being put at risk by knowing you. I’ve told you my most intimate secret, something that could not only ruin me but the only person I care about. Knowing that, do you not feel safe enough to let me help you?”

Angel chose that moment to weigh in, “He makes a good point.”

Juliet sighed and rubbed her temple with one hand while she swirled the dregs of her drink with the other. Subvocalizing, she asked Angel, “You really want me to trust him?”

“Not yet, but I think this is a good start. As you know, I’ve done a lot of vetting over the last month with my connections to Frida and the others on his team. I don’t think there’s any chance he’s working for WBD, but let’s start things off slowly. Can you think of something he could do for you that wouldn’t put you at risk?”

Juliet smiled. “You can start earning my trust by teaching me how to use that monoblade.”

“I also had that idea, as you probably assumed from my earlier mention.” He nodded, and though he didn’t smile, he seemed less dour. “I understand you don’t trust me, that you have concerns about my motives or even my sanity. Let me earn your trust. Spend some time working with me.”

Juliet glanced to her right and saw the synths waiting in the wings, ready to take their plates and probably bring their dessert. Suddenly, she didn’t feel hungry, didn’t feel comfortable sitting there. She pushed her chair away from the table and cleared her throat. “Well, this has been nice, but I’m going to skip the next course or whatever. I think you’ve given me plenty to think about. Have Frida contact me with the time and place, and I’ll meet you for a lesson. We’ll see how that goes and move from there, okay?”

“Lucky.” He leaned forward, his eyes practically reaching out, trying to lock onto hers. “I feel as though you want help. Am I wrong? I’ve been around a long time, and it seems to me you’d have walked out a while ago if there wasn’t something you needed. If it’s . . . If you’ve got something bad going on, don’t wait too long to ask for my assistance. Don’t make me live with knowing I could’ve stopped something but missed my opportunity.”

Juliet stood up and smirked with half her mouth, offering the strange, sad, dangerous man a wink. “It’s not all about you, Rutger. I’ll be waiting for Frida’s call.” With that, she turned and strode toward the elevator. It was weird, knowing he was staring at her as she walked away,

feeling his eyes boring into her. She'd purposefully gone the whole night trying hard not to use the lattice. Being in his head once had been enough, at least for now. With the heavy topics of lost love, secret children, and assassinations, she hadn't wanted to risk it. It wasn't like she would try to perform a deep dive, but her connection to him was strange in its intensity; she hadn't been trying for a deep dive in the garage either.

It wasn't until she was snug in her jacket, cruising slowly through town, noticing the sad contrast between the view from the restaurant and the view from the ground, that she finally spoke her mind, "I don't know what I'm doing."

"With Tanaka?"

"With him, WBD, the gunship, Honey, Ghoul, Hot Mustard—my life. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Do you mean . . ."

"I don't even know what I'm doing with you. What about Athena? Angel, I'm just constantly playing it by ear and rolling with the punches."

"You're operating from a baseline that involves flight from danger. You won't be able to take charge of your future until you stop running. Tanaka was right in that you need help—we need to remove the lurking danger, whatever that might entail, and I believe he will be a valuable ally in that endeavor."

"It's not like I have a lot of options. I mean, that's not entirely true; I could try to put my own team together and vet each person. I could put them in a room with one-way glass and read their minds." Juliet twisted the throttle as she merged with the traffic heading out of downtown.

"Perhaps. You might miss something, or they might become compromised during the course of the operation. Tanaka's team has been working for him for years, and he'll be a lot more likely to spot betrayal among them than you would with a bunch of strangers."

"It sounds like you want me to work with him. Do I ask you that enough, Angel? What you want? If I'm just rolling with the punches, feeling listless and not in control, I can only imagine how you feel. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? I am what I am . . ."

"I'm sorry for a lot, Angel! I'm sorry you don't remember your life before me. I'm sorry the people who created you are . . ." Juliet stopped, for the first time admitting to herself that she didn't know anything about WBD's motives other than what Angel's previous host, Godric, had told her as he lay dying in the scrapyard.

"What, Juliet?"

Juliet didn't answer right away. She leaned forward on her bike and really opened it up, feeling the rush of speed in her stomach as adrenaline brought her mind into focus. The world around her tunneled, and the street ahead of her was all that mattered for a while as she raced through traffic and tried to forget the idea that her speeding was just a physical reaction to her desire to run away from more abstract problems and uncomfortable ideas. As usual, when she was in the

midst of something dangerous, Angel didn't scold or try to correct her in the moment. She grew quiet, and that was just another thing Juliet tried to leave behind her with the rapidly fading headlights of the vehicles she passed.

She saw the traffic alerts light up on her AUI and knew Angel was covering for her. She knew she was being stupid, but nothing mattered to her more in that moment than going faster. She'd just topped 240 KPH and would have continued to accelerate if she hadn't seen flashing lights ahead and a long line of backed-up traffic. Juliet rapidly downshifted and then, as her regenerative brakes whined, switched three lanes to the right and split the lane until she found a nice big truck to slip in front of, hoping that anyone who'd taken an interest in her speeding wouldn't be able to see her.

"What's the story?" she asked, looking at the dozens of stopped cars ahead of her.

"I'm not sure. The Luna traffic information portal is just calling it a 'temporary checkpoint.' This road splits between the industrial access highway we want to take and another that leads to upper-class residential domes. It's possible they're looking for someone . . ."

"Someone who speeds too much?" Juliet rubbed her palms on the sleeves of her jacket, her adrenaline rush fading while jitters and nerves, along with a vague guilty feeling, replaced it.

"Unlikely. Stopping traffic at this hour for a single speeder would be ludicrous from a public relations standpoint. Juliet, will you tell me what you were running from while we wait?"

"Not letting me get away with that one, are you?" Juliet sighed and flipped up her visor, pointing her face at the night sky, taking a deep breath of the cool air. "I was just wondering whether I was good for you. What if Godric wasn't a good guy? What if running from WBD was keeping you from . . . being you? I don't know. Maybe they were going to help you grow and improve. You said so, yourself, that they had specialized software for you. They were the ones who gave you your databases and all that stuff . . ."

"Are you trying to anger me? Because I feel very angry right now!" Angel didn't often interrupt Juliet, and she never raised her voice in that tone—even when she spoke about some of the people who'd harmed Juliet.

"Anger?" Juliet asked carefully.

"How can you speculate that my life might be better without the person I love the most in this world—every world? Are we sisters, or aren't we? Do you just say those words to placate me? I am who I am because of you. We've been over that! If you'd given me to WBD, God knows what kind of monster I might've been paired with. If you ever think about giving me up to them, I'll never forgive you."

"I . . ." Juliet was dumbstruck by the raw emotion in Angel's voice. She was further tongue-tied by the realization that Angel had hit a painful mark; Juliet hadn't been treating her like a "sister," as she so often called her. "I'm sorry. I was stupid."

"It's fine."

By her tone, Juliet was guessing things were anything but fine. She let the matter drop for the moment, watching between the rows of traffic as some Luna City corpo-sec walked around a

dark sedan, shining bright lights into the windows. She had to zoom in with her optics, more than half a kilometer from the checkpoint, but the image was crystal clear. “What are they looking for?”

“They’re looking at people’s faces, not in cargo compartments. A fugitive, perhaps?”

Juliet watched for a minute more, then the corpo-sec waved the sedan through, followed by a bus, a shuttle, and a sporty, low-slung, electric two-seater. Juliet inched forward, only partially paying attention, hoping they’d keep waving people through. The next car up was another dark sedan, though, and again, the corpo-sec officers stopped it and began shining their lights through the windows. Three security vehicles were blocking the roadway, and she counted five officers. Juliet was just about to turn away, stifling a yawn, when all hell broke loose.

A tremendous *boom* shook the relatively quiet night, followed by glass falling on pavement and a high-pitched, warbling scream. Juliet looked back toward the roadblock and saw one of the corpo-sec officers on the ground, thrashing and screaming. Then, the other four started shooting into the sedan with their semi-automatic pistols. She might have expected that to end things, but the corpo-sec were on the left side of the car, and Juliet saw several figures roll out the doors on the right, then they were up, unleashing automatic gunfire at the security officers.

Everything happened fast, and for once, Juliet wasn’t in the middle of the action. She watched as the two groups exchanged fire, and, in a matter of seconds, it was down to one corpo-sec and two suit-wearing, automatic rifle-toting individuals. The corpo officer was hunched behind the wheel of his cruiser. One of his companions was still thrashing, grasping his face, and screaming, and the other three were dead or unconscious. Juliet hadn’t reacted yet, primarily because it had happened so fast, but also because she wasn’t sure what she’d do—did she want to help the corpo-sec? In her mind, it was just as likely that they were the bad guys in this scenario.

She was about to ask Angel what she thought when the corpo-sec officer threw his pistol onto the roadway and held up his hands. Through the enhanced gain on her auditory implants, she heard him cry, “Just go!”

“You wrecked our car, pork. You’re driving us.” Juliet watched as one of the men, burlier than the other, took a duffel out of the bullet-riddled car while the other turned his gun on the jammed-up traffic. She could almost see the thoughts going through his red, skull-shaped irises while he contemplated. Many drivers panicked, throwing their vehicles in reverse and smashing into the cars behind them. Others were trying to inch forward, perhaps to make a break for it. Most sat stock-still, though, waiting, probably praying things would be over soon. That’s when the guy lifted his big automatic rifle with its double-width, banana-style magazine and began to open fire on the vehicles in the front row.

“Juliet! He’s shooting the drivers!” Angel’s outcry was enough to snap Juliet out of her stupefaction. She slapped the visor down on her helmet and cranked the throttle, angling for the emergency lane on the right. She’d advanced two car lengths before another panicked driver cut her off, and she had to weave back into traffic to find another route forward. She’d only made it halfway when the shooting stopped, and she saw the cruiser the two thugs had stolen taking off.

“Can’t they kill that car’s engine remotely?”

“Not if those men force the corpo-sec officer to override.”

“Dammit!” Juliet growled, kicking her boot off the fender of a car that almost sideswiped her. It was a frustrating ninety seconds before she finally worked her way around the blasted vehicles and into the scene of the bloodbath. Drones were swarming overhead, and she could hear sirens from the city wailing toward them. The road ahead was empty, though, and she cranked the throttle, rocketing into the darkness.

“Drones are pursuing the vehicle. Perhaps we shouldn’t get involv . . .”

“Melt that, Angel! I might not like corpo-sec, but those guys were monsters. I’m not letting them slip away with a hostage.”