

Juliet spent the weekend watching over a crew from a local company called Reactor Safe Innovations as they inspected, serviced, and brought online the gunship's He-3 reactor. She was alone; Aya and Bennet were up in orbit helping to get things started on the *Red Betty* salvage. Shiro and Alice didn't think they'd need both of them for the whole job but wanted to make a strong start, so they'd been snagged from gunship duty for a week. Juliet didn't mind; she was decompressing after a busy few days filled with strange interactions with too many people, from Sergeant Hines to Honey to Frida and Applebaum. She was ready for some downtime without anyone talking to her.

The crew from Reactor Safe were mostly self-directing; they had a job to do, and they knew what it entailed. Still, they didn't exactly leave Juliet alone, especially when they got into the reactor room and realized it was the original Takamoto He-3 powerplant. They were impressed, to say the least. Tom, the crew supervisor, told her they'd been expecting to see an aftermarket retrofit. Apparently, in the decades following the war, Cybergen and Takamoto He-3 reactors were heavily cannibalized for use with high-end luxury yachts and personal security vessels—their compact nature and proprietary cooling tech made them highly sought after.

He went on to describe how there were certain luxury ship makers with designs that wouldn't work without a Takamoto-era drive, not without adding twenty percent more mass to the final specifications. Juliet, always eager to talk ships, cars, or bikes, was intrigued by the story, but all it really did was make her more nervous than ever about the *Furies' Wing* and the ridiculous artifact that it was—even without the highly illegal, world-shattering, secret AI sleeping aboard.

On Friday, the team diagnosed the reactor and all of its systems. On Saturday, they flushed the coolant system, ran new lines, performed maintenance on the magnetic confinement system, and prepped the new core. On Sunday, they loaded in fresh He-3 pellets and fired it up so they could calibrate everything. Juliet was lying in her bunk, trying to make sense of a sci-fi book from Aya's big haul called *Dune*, when the power flickered as the gunship's drive came to life. They'd been running things from an external grid cable, but as the drive hummed through the plasteel frame, the lights brightened, and the air circulation system began to blow in earnest, producing much cooler air.

When the Reactor Safe team left in the afternoon, the gunship had a clean, well-serviced He-3 powerplant smoothly humming away, and Juliet couldn't help feeling that the day when it was ready to launch was suddenly much closer. As they drove off, Juliet brought a couple of beers out to the security guards she had on duty, and though they protested, and she had to insist, they drank them and made small talk with her for a little while. According to them, crime was still up in the industrial domes, and more and more companies were hiring personal security. The conversation got Juliet wondering about Hines and what kind of progress he'd made, but when she messaged him, all she got back was a quick reply saying he'd get back to her soon.

The following week went by in a kind of blur. Juliet met Honey downtown for breakfast before practice with Tanaka each day, during which she continued to impress everyone. Of course, it was Angel who was really doing the impressing, but Juliet wasn't ready to hand off all the credit. She worked hard and had some natural talent—even Applebaum admitted that. Still, even knowing that, she had to admit that feeling the movements done perfectly by Angel helped her grasp things exponentially faster.

Tanaka kept teaching them basic stances and cuts, but he did so in an additive fashion so that by Thursday, Juliet was smoothly moving through several cut combinations, with footwork that had seemed simple, but only because Tanaka taught it to them step by step, forcing them to

perfect each step before adding the next piece. Each day, after new learning, Tanaka led them in drills, and Juliet unfailingly felt persecuted during that part of practice—she was the only one “learning to use a monoblade,” so Tanaka had extra activities for her when everyone else was finished.

He continued to count the accidental marks she made with her practice monoblade, and though Juliet didn’t believe him, he claimed that the fewer marks she produced meant fewer rounds of extra blade discipline training. She didn’t believe him because it always seemed to take about forty-five minutes regardless of how careful she’d been during practice. Honey stayed with her for the first couple of practices, but eventually, things felt less awkward, and she didn’t feel guilty about showering and heading out while Juliet was still doing her remediation. Juliet didn’t resent her; it had to be tedious watching her perform the slow, careful movements with the sword blade over and over.

Tanaka’s VR training room—basically a room-sized dream-rig—wasn’t ready to use until Tuesday, but when it was done, Juliet got to enter simulations instead of working with rings or dummy synths, making things a lot more entertaining during her extra practice. He had sims for chasing people through pretty much any environment, sims for every kind of battle with any number of opponents, sims that were basically high-tech versions of the ring tree, and sims that were designed to help her perfect her foundations.

Those foundational sims were more fun than Juliet had anticipated when he first loaded her into one. All she had to do was perform the cuts the anime-style instructor modeled, and when she did it, it played them back for her, showing her exactly how she held her hands, the angle of her sword, her posture, her foot movement—everything. Angel loved it, memorizing the data to help Juliet even more efficiently. Still, of all the sims, Juliet loved the ones where she was chasing people, which was a good thing because Tanaka favored them, too. He thought chasing people in various environments was great practice for everything from blade discipline to hand-eye coordination to split-second decision-making.

Thursday, after she was done with her personal purgatory of drills, Juliet stepped out of the VR sim and found Tanaka in the dojo exercising with his sword. He had a way of moving that Juliet hadn’t recognized when they’d first started, but now that she’d been practicing for a week, learning a bit more about what it took to control a sword perfectly, she had to admit he was impressive. He had such perfect control, such explosive speed, and such fluidity that Juliet felt clumsy just watching. “And that’s with your help,” she muttered. Angel didn’t reply, but a question mark appeared on her AUI. She’d been doing that lately—using non-verbal input to try to simulate body language.

Tanaka noticed her and smoothly sheathed his sword. “I just read the report from the VR suite. You did well.” Tanaka didn’t often offer praise, so, of course, Juliet felt herself beaming at the comment. She caught a lot of flak during practice from Applebaum and even Honey; they’d taken to ganging up to try to bring Juliet down a notch whenever she flawlessly performed a new skill. Juliet knew they were just messing around. Well, she knew Honey was just messing around, so she didn’t let it bother her. She knew how frustrating it could be to watch someone else master something you were struggling with, so she had to expect some grief, anyway. She’d decided to let Angel help her, and she’d have to deal with the consequences.

“Thanks.” She nodded in a close approximation of a very informal bow. She wasn’t totally warmed up to Tanaka and didn’t like the constant show of obeisance other people gave him, but she had to respect him as a teacher. He was good.

"I . . . learned from my master that praise can be a corruption to a student, that it can cling to them, festering and growing, until it builds a false sense of pride and a flaw in character. Nevertheless, I have to say that you have a gift. I've never seen someone so perfectly master every cut, every movement, every combination. At first, I thought you were running software through your cybernetic arm. That it was performing programmed movements. That's not it, though—your entire body moves with perfection, even when I teach an advanced technique like my master's shinsetsu kaze tori, something you wouldn't find in a training program."

Juliet nodded, shrugging. She'd been anticipating this conversation, and, honestly, she'd felt suspicious when Tanaka threw that maneuver into the day's practice. It had come from nowhere and didn't fit into the generally smooth progression of skills they'd been learning up to that point. It was a disarming technique that Tanaka said only his "master's" school would know, a closely guarded secret. "I won't lie to you, but I won't tell you all my secrets. I have some proprietary tech, something I can't take out or give to someone else, that helps me to learn things quickly." She sighed and stepped a little closer. "I mean, I've also been told I have a talent for this stuff and that the tech I have works especially well because of my neural and cellular adaptiveness, but," she shrugged, "I can't take all the credit."

He nodded. "The proof of your talent will be in your ability to take everything you learn and apply it fluidly." After a pause, during which Juliet just looked at him impassively, he added, "So far, you seem to be doing that just fine; the simulations indicate a strong synthesis of learned skills."

"So, we don't have a problem?"

"A problem? No. I am just wondering if I'm teaching you too slowly."

"I don't think so!" Juliet laughed. "I guess, if you think it will help, you could increase the difficulty on the sims, and maybe I could start doing some actual fights in there . . ." Earlier on, he'd scolded her for trying to load the combat sims, saying she didn't have the proper foundations and that she'd build bad habits.

"Hai. I'll think about it." He looked at her, his face hard to read as usual, and then he *sort of* smiled. Juliet could see just a glimmer of what a genuine smile would be like in his eyes and the very faint upward tilt of his lips. "Have a good weekend."

"Are you . . . happy?" Juliet couldn't help the teasing tone, and for just a couple of seconds, she forgot the awkwardness between them, but then he looked down, almost ashamed, and it all came crashing back. He started to turn, and she'd seen his quick exits too often not to recognize one in the making, so she said, "Hey, I was just joking around. You gotta lighten up a little, don't you think?" She wasn't sure what had been different about that moment that made her confront the issue head-on, but something had gotten ahold of her tongue, and now that the words were out, she wanted to push through things.

"I try, but . . ." He sighed, shaking his head. "This isn't proper for a teacher to discuss with a student."

"Class is over. Come on, what's the deal? I'm the one who's supposed to be nervous around you, not the other way around."

He turned to her and held one of his tattooed hands to his chest. "I feel dread here."

“Dread?”

“Yes. That I’ll say the wrong thing. That you’ll discover the wrong thing. That something will happen to make you leave.” He sighed, and his usually stiff, square shoulders slumped. “How can I be a good teacher when I fear my students?”

“You fear me?”

“I fear you leaving.”

Juliet had heard him the first time, but she forced herself to look at the words the second time he said it. It seemed like his entire life revolved around “helping” her now. If she took that away from him, what would he do? Is that what his fear was about? Part of her wanted to reassure him, to tell him that she meant to stay and keep training with him. Part of her wanted to tell him she was even working up the nerve to ask him for help scoping out WBD’s research facilities. For some reason, those parts of her kept quiet, and the sliver of herself that resented Tanaka, that still clung to images of him as she’d first met him, spoke up, “Well, you should load a shrink program into that VR room of yours. If I got all messed up every time someone walked out of my life, I’d never get out of bed.”

Even if his face hadn’t fallen, even if he hadn’t nodded, silently agreeing with her, Juliet would have felt bad. She regretted the words the instant she said them, but something in her wouldn’t let her take them back. In any case, the damage was done. The sliver of happiness on Tanaka’s face was gone, and he performed his usual quick goodbye bow, turned, and left. “I’m a bitch,” she subvocalized, and Angel’s silence spoke volumes.

Juliet took a shower and changed into her street clothes. That day, she was wearing her favorite stretchy jeans, the t-shirt Honey had given her, and a new pair of hand-made, black, silver-tipped motorcycle boots she’d ordered from Chicago. Of course, she couldn’t verify they were handmade, but they were certainly high quality. They reminded her of cowboy boots, and she felt pretty cool walking around in them. She’d also purchased some custom clips to wear her practice monoblade on her gun belt; it hung from her left hip and took a lot of getting used to, but she was warming up to it.

Applebaum, as usual, was hanging around chatting Frida up when she left. He usually had a biting—or teasing, depending on how you looked at it—remark for her about practice, her clothes, or something along those lines, so she wasn’t surprised when he cleared his throat. His words caught her off guard, though, “Hey, no practice tomorrow. Wanna go get drunk?”

Frida didn’t say anything, but Juliet saw her press her lips together and look down; clearly, she didn’t approve of the idea. She thought about a few responses, most of them negative, several of them quite cutting, but she decided to play things neutrally, considering Applebaum hadn’t inserted any sort of insult into his invitation. “I would, but my friends are coming moon-side tonight, and I promised I’d make dinner.”

“You would, though? Otherwise?”

“Um, yeah, otherwise.” She shrugged.

“See? Told you she’d go out with me.” He nudged Frida in the shoulder with his fist, and Frida groaned, slapping a hand in front of her eyes.

“Oh, get melted, dreamer.” Juliet flipped him the bird and stomped for the door.

“I didn’t make a bet with him! He’s an idiot!” Frida called after her. Juliet didn’t look back as she made her way to the elevator. Her interaction with Tanaka and then the nonsense with Applebaum had put her into a sour mood, and she didn’t want to end up snapping at Frida. She’d bet money Frida was an innocent pawn in Applebaum’s game.

“Struggling with interpersonal matters today, aren’t you?” Angel asked as the elevator doors closed.

“At least I’ve got you, sis.”

“I was quite upset at how you treated Tanaka.”

Juliet groaned and leaned forward, gently banging her forehead against the closed elevator doors. “I’m sorry.” She wanted to justify herself, but what was the point? Angel knew everything about her, and she knew she’d been wrong. Still, despite herself, she said, “My reaction wasn’t logical; it was just a part of me that wanted to act out. I think I’m just sick of him acting like everything is so *heavy* all the time. You know? I just want to be able to move forward.”

“He’s moving forward, but his therapy requires you, and he’s afraid you’re going to leave. He has no security in his . . .”

“I get it, Angel, but put yourself in my shoes! Is it fair for him to put that on me?” She snorted a laugh as the doors opened and began striding across the lobby. “Really? Therapy?”

“Wouldn’t you describe what he’s gaining from your lessons as therapy?”

“I guess it fits.” Juliet was a fast walker, and she was standing before her bike in the parking garage in no time—there hadn’t been any spots on the street when she’d arrived. She was adjusting her helmet and pulling the visor down when a voice, unmistakably Applebaum’s, called out from behind her.

“Hey!”

She turned, visor still up, and scowled at him. He was jogging toward her from the garage elevator bank. “What?”

“Hey, Frida’s pissed at me. She didn’t have anything to do with that. I was just being dumb.”

“Yeah?” Juliet swung a leg over her bike, ready to start it up.

“Yeah. My invitation was sincere, and I was just being a smartass when you said no. Do you really have plans tonight?”

“I said I did, didn’t I?”

“Well, listen. The boys wanna meet you. Everyone wants to know what you’re like, and I’m sick of answering questions.”

“The boys?” Juliet knew who he meant, but she was in the mood to be difficult.

“You know, Tanaka’s mercs here on Luna. Hawkins, Lee, Barnes.”

Juliet raised an eyebrow, a little tricky considering her helmet pressing on her forehead, but she managed. “Dora Lee? She likes being called one of the boys?”

“Ah, she doesn’t care, love. Calls herself that half the time.”

“Did you just call me love?”

“Oh, just a habit when I’m talking to a pretty lady . . .” His smug smile was almost more than she could take.

Juliet’s scowl returned with a vengeance. “Get . . .”

“Melted. Right. Listen, if I promise not to call you love or some other demeaning term of endearment, will you think about meeting up with me and the squad this weekend? If not tonight, maybe tomorrow or Saturday?”

“Can I bring friends?” Juliet wondered if mixing her Kowashi friends with Tanaka’s crew would be colossally stupid.

“If it makes you feel better . . .”

“Is Frida coming?” Something about having Frida along made the whole thing seem less risky, almost like if she endorsed it and was present, there was no way these clowns would mess with Juliet too much.

“I haven’t asked, but I’m sure she’d . . .”

“I’m free Saturday. Have her message me the time and place, and I’ll think about it.” Juliet touched the ignition button, and her bike rumbled to life. As Applebaum started to reply, she slapped her visor down and twisted the throttle, producing a faux-exhaust roar. She tapped the side of her helmet and made a shrugging gesture.

He scowled and started to yell, “I said, I’ve got a fun idea . . .” Juliet laughed as she peeled out and left him standing there, mid-shout.

“That made me feel better, Angel.”

“Well, at least he deserves some teasing, considering all the digs he threw your way this week.”

“C’mon, I wasn’t *that* hard on Tanaka. It’s really not a bad idea for him to get some counseling. Hey! Send him a link to the net store where you got Dr. Ming with my compliments. Maybe he’ll think I was being sincere . . .”

“Are you saying you plan to gaslight Tanaka into thinking you weren’t rudely shutting him down?”

“Gaslight? Angel, you always pick the worst extreme to describe my behavior when it involves Tanaka!” Juliet was unconsciously speeding, something that tended to happen whenever she drove angry, and she fought to ease back on the throttle. “Look, I know you like him, but . . .”

“I wish I’d never told you that.” Those words stung, and they made Juliet clamp her mouth shut and really think about her behavior. She’d already admitted she’d been wrong. She’d already caught herself acting short-fused at least three times that day. Why was she willing to fight with Angel about it? Why was she being disagreeable with everyone?

“I’m sorry, Angel. That was petty and stupid. I know you said you admired things about him, not that you are in love or something, and it’s rotten of me to use that against you. Truce?”

“Truce. Thank you for apologizing.”

“I’ll try to be more open-minded to him starting Monday, all right?”

“I can’t ask for anything else. Now, you have a call waiting from Hines. I’ve had him on hold for a minute because I wanted to resolve our differences.”

“Oh? Hines? Put him through.”

As soon as Hines's weary, grizzled face appeared on her AUI, he began to speak, “Lucky! I’m glad I got ahold of you. Listen, I might need your help. I heard through a CI that there’s a hit out on me. Seems like my inquiries about the stolen parts racket in the industrial domes might have ruffled the wrong feathers.”