

Juliet stood near the airlock with the rest of the crew, watching the Port Authority inspectors walk away through the vid feed Angel had provided, using their own hardware to spy on them. The three inspectors made small talk, wondering what they should get for lunch, without another mention of the *Kowashi*. Bennet was the first to break the silence with a fist pump, "Hell yes! We're clear!"

"It seems so!" Alice shook her head, disbelief in her voice.

"Were you guys worried?" Juliet asked, holding up her hands defensively as they all turned on her, some scowling, some smiling. Her right arm clicked and moved a little haltingly; Bennet had done his best, but some of the parts weren't quite right. "Kidding, kidding! Whew! So when can we take off?"

"Lockdown's not lifted, but my contacts in the scrap industry say it will be—if not today, then tonight," Shiro answered.

"I'm going to go give the girls the good news and get my guns." Juliet started to walk away, and Aya jogged up beside her.

"I'll come along; I was teaching Rissa and Cel how to play chess."

"You play chess?" Juliet knew what it was, but only from media; she'd never seen a board, at least not a physical one.

"Sure. Shiro's dad made us both learn. Good for the brain!" She grinned, showing off her bright teeth, and twisted her forefinger against her skull as though pointing at the gray matter within.

"Thanks for helping with them, Aya. You're a pretty cool chick; you know that? I might even say nuclear." Juliet bumped her hip against the smaller woman, eliciting another laugh and a retaliatory hip check. They continued laughing and joking all the way to the cargo bay, but Aya grew quiet when they stepped inside and had to walk around the hulking form of the Takamoto gunship.

"It's kind of spooky," she said, jerking her thumb at the big greenish-gray shape.

"You think so?"

"Yeah, it's so old and so . . . deadly. Think about how many people died in it or fighting against it. That's a lot of ghosts."

"Are you just messing with me right now? You believe in ghosts?" Juliet stopped and looked at the ship, admiring its lines, sleek despite the many missing hull plates, scratches, and dents. "I don't think it's haunted, Aya. It's just sad, mistreated, and needs new owners to give it some TLC. Do you think it's a he or a she? I mean, Alice calls the *Kowashi* she and her. You all do."

"Most ships are girls; you didn't know that?"

"Most?"

"I'm sure some break the tradition, but it's a really old one. It's bad luck not to have a girl ship! Shiro's dad said so. He said ships are women because they're like a mother or fairy godmother

that protects the crew. If you treat her right, she'll take care of you. Besides, women are the best, right?" She grinned and winked, then started toward the back of the gunship.

Juliet reached up with her clicking, grinding cyber arm and let her tactile pads run along the hull of the gunship while she followed her, hanging back a bit. She liked the feel of it—cool, solid, patient, powerful. In a soft, almost reverent voice, she said, "You're in bad shape right now, lady, but we're going to fix you up. I don't care what Alice and Shiro say; I'm going to be your pilot. Nice to meet you; I'm Juliet."

"Hmm?" Aya was five meters or so ahead of her, and she turned, "Did you ask me something?"

"Nah, just talking to the ship." It was Juliet's turn to grin and wink. When they entered the gunship through the rear, open airlock, Aya had to cut some welds on the plasteel panels Bennet had put up to block the main passage. The ruse had worked perfectly; he'd lightly irradiated the panels by exposing them to the *Kowashi's* reactor, and when the inspector who'd been given the job of inspecting the cargo bay listened to his story about an old, leaking weld in the reactor shielding, he'd eaten it up, giving it only a cursory inspection.

As they pulled the panels aside, Honey, Cel, and Rissa were revealed standing in the small cargo space beyond, no doubt glad to see they weren't sealed in any longer. "Alice messaged us," Honey announced. "Glad it went well!"

"Oh yeah, you and us both," Aya said, then she frowned and said, "You and us . . . wait, both isn't the right word, but what's the word for when six people all agree?"

"All," Juliet sighed, "the word is all, Aya. We're all relieved."

"Guess that works," she shrugged, then looked past Honey to the two younger women. "You guys wanna play a couple of matches?"

"I do," Rissa said, resting a hand on her belly. She was wan but looked a hundred times better than when Juliet had found her. Cel did, too; both wore old overalls, probably Aya's or Alice's, but they were clean and well-fed, and the haunted look that used to dwell in their eyes was fading, if not wholly gone.

"Hey, can we cook something tonight? Do we have to stay in the gunship all the time?" Cel asked.

"Yeah, of course." Aya turned to see that Juliet agreed with her. When she nodded, Aya continued, "Just have to get back in here if someone's coming onboard the *Kowashi*. You guys wanna cook?"

"Yeah! I know a great curry recipe." Cel grasped Rissa's hand and added, "It's the least I can do, you know, for everything you've done for us."

"She's a great cook!" Rissa's eyes said a lot about how much she cared for Cel as she gazed at the taller, stick-thin woman.

"Oh! You're speaking my language!" Aya laughed, gestured past the girls, and said, "Come on, you can tell me what ingredients you need while we play a couple of matches."

As they walked away, Honey said, "This old ship is nuts. I found hardpoints for nanite swarms. I think it used to be able to repair itself."

"Just superficial damage, according to Bennet. It used to be able to patch the hull plating and active shielding layer. Bigger components like the reactor and whatnot were outside the nanites' specs. Still, in a gunfight, it's kinda nice to know your ship won't stay full of holes."

"I mean, it's space. If you get perforated, you're pretty much dead anyway, right?" Honey looked around the rough rear corridor of the ship, eyeing all the exposed wires, missing panels, stains, scrapes, dents, and gaps where various components had been pulled over the years. "Feels like a deathtrap to me."

"You just don't see the potential. We're going to fix her up. She was made for brawling, Honey. Tons of redundant systems, air-sealed compartments, fire suppression . . ." Juliet let her wistful words trail off, knowing she could go on and on about the old ship. As she spoke, she let her eyes unfocus as she imagined how the corridor had looked when the gunship was new.

"Well, I mean, you do you, but I'm not keen on all this space travel stuff, and I definitely don't want to get in any ship 'gunfights,' if you know what I mean."

Juliet looked at her friend and saw the distaste on her face as she looked around, probably imagining getting killed a thousand different ways. She was right; space was dangerous. Juliet really couldn't blame her, couldn't judge her, but still, she felt a bit of disappointment for the second time in as many days. She wondered if she'd just changed a lot since she'd hung out with Honey, going to the dojo every day, or if she'd just never gotten to know the parts of herself that differed from the plucky swordswoman. "I get it, I guess. I mean, yeah, it's scary, but . . . I love it. I love these ships and the sense of, oh, I don't know, freedom, I guess. Yeah, I love the freedom they represent."

"I feel you. Yeah, that's a legit reason to love a spaceship, but," she leaned close, lowering her voice, "Jules, I want some solid gravity under my feet. I want to know that a hole in the wall isn't going to spell death. You know?"

"Sure. I won't lie; I had fantasies of us traveling the system together, taking jobs on exotic moons, and meeting all kinds of interesting people. Hah, I sound like such a dope!" Juliet smiled a little sadly at her, a bunch of doors closing in her mind, doors leading to possible future endeavors that included her friend. "What are you planning to do when we get back to Luna?" she asked, wondering if she could find a way to open some different doors.

"I've got to look after Lilia." She shrugged as though it were settled.

"Um, she has access to a fortune. She has her uncle, Peter. She'll have protection after Peter exposes Levkin's crimes."

"It's . . . I know this is stupid, J, but I've grown attached to her. I know she's not really 'her' in there, but she needs looking after, and whatever program they gave that PAI makes her very sweet. Besides, I have a bonus coming to me when the PAI finishes writing Alexander's data. The PAI won't listen to anyone else. I mean, I could pass off the permissions, but then I'd be responsible if anyone took advantage! Alexander trusted me . . ."

“Are you serious right now?” Juliet couldn’t help herself. Honey’s breathless explanation didn’t seem real. “You’re going to give that thing five years of your life? If it’s the money, just stick with me! I’ll help you make it up!”

Honey frowned, then folded her arms on her chest and said, “Please don’t call her a thing. Are you really judging me right now? I’ve seen how close you are to your PAI! Lilia’s more than a simple, cheap assistant program! Besides, I was there when Alexander had his brain scanned; when he finishes downloading, he’s going to be looking for me!”

“She,” Juliet corrected.

“Right,” Honey shook her head. “It doesn’t matter! I want to be there for him. Her! You know what I mean!”

“Were you, like, a thing?” When Honey scowled at her again, Juliet added, “Come on, Honey! I’m trying to understand here. You can trust me!”

“We weren’t, no. I had a crush on him, sure, and,” tears began to well in her eyes, “dammit, Juliet, it hurt so bad when Levkin showed us his death. I lost all hope, and that little girl in there,” she jerked her thumb further into the gunship, “was all I had during the scariest time in my life.”

“She *wasn’t* all you had, though. I was coming for you.” Juliet’s voice had grown soft, and she felt answering tears coming to her eyes, somehow feeling sort of crushed by this whole thing. What had she expected? What did she want from Honey? They weren’t romantic, but had she ever dismissed the possibility? No, they were buddies, sisters, right? She thought about her real sister and then Angel, and more doors closed in her mind; Honey was great, and they were good friends, but she was no Angel.

“I know, sis,” Honey said, oblivious to the thoughts fluttering through Juliet’s mind. She put her arms around her, squeezed her, and added, “I didn’t know that, though. I thought I was alone; I thought I was going to die as soon as Levkin finished with Lilia. If I’d known you were coming, everything would have been different, but I didn’t.”

Juliet forced a smile and extricated herself from Honey’s grasp. “All right, all right. Take it easy. I’m not thrilled about all this, but I can let it go. I’m just disappointed ‘cause I figured we’d spend some time together. Like I said, I’d hoped we’d do some jobs together. You know, see some things around the solar system together,” Juliet waved her arm, clicking and scraping, in a half circle, indicating the ships they were inside. “I’ll get over it. I’m glad you’re safe, all right?”

Rather than answer, Honey pulled her back into a hug, wrapping her arms around her ribs, squeezing her tight, and pressing her face into her chest. They stood that way for a few seconds until Juliet returned the hug, clutching her friend close. After a while, Honey mumbled into her chest, “I’ll never forget how you came for me, Jules. I’ll never forget it, and I’ll always owe you.”

“You don’t owe me shit, dummy. I’m your friend, and I’ll do the same thing again and again if you need it.”

“At least we’ve got the journey home together. Bennet says we’re going to have a lot of fun.” Honey pulled back, eyes red, cheeks wet.

Juliet laughed and rubbed her flesh-and-blood thumb over Honey's cheek, wiping away some tears. "Bennet is a nutcase. His idea of fun is fabricating machine parts and lifting weights. Well, and eating. He has great taste in food."

"Sounds like you and he get along pretty well, huh?"

"Yeah, he's cool. I like everyone on this ship. That's why I'm going into business with 'em. Wanna hear about it? Wanna hear what we're going to do this beauty?" Juliet grinned and gestured at the gunship. "I'll tell you about it while I get my stuff. Gotta get my guns and put 'em back in my bunk."

"For sure. Tell me about your big plans, sister. Hey, you should take that sword, too." Honey took her arm, and the two of them started up the corridor.

"Huh? The monoblade? You're the swordswoman, sis." The appellation came naturally to her as they fell into their old banter.

"Uh-uh, sis. That thing's worth a hundred k. You aren't giving me that."

"Holy . . . seriously?"

"Yeah, I want you to take it, but promise me you won't use it until you've done some serious sword training. I'm going to feel bad if you slice off your own arm or leg or head or . . ."

"I get it. I get it!"

"Seriously, J!" Honey laughed. "That thing can slice through plasteel like cheese!"

"I get it!" Juliet cried again, and the two laughed as they entered the ship's little mess, where Aya and the two girls had set up a neat chess deck with a holographic board and pieces. "A dedicated chess deck? Or does it do other games?" she asked, leaning closer to watch as one of the black knights charged over the board to capture a white pawn.

"Just chess. I told you! Shiro's dad was serious about it!" Aya grinned at her and asked, "Can I teach you sometime?"

"I'd love it." Juliet studied all the interesting pieces, watching their idle animations. "When you said you were teaching them chess, I pictured an old-school board with, like, wooden pieces or something."

"I have one of those too, but it's an antique. My auntie wouldn't let me bring it on the ship."

"Is that Shiro's mom?"

"Yes! They spent as much time raising me as my parents did. They all worked on the *Kowashi* at one point, my parents and his. My parents and Shiro's mom live in a retirement community on Mars now—the Marineris Colony."

"Your turn, Aya," Rissa said softly, eyes glued to the chess board.

“C’mon, Lucky,” Honey tugged at her arm, and they walked through the port hatch to one of the crew bunks. There she found the big duffel containing all her guns and the monoblade.

Juliet hoisted the duffel and tried one more time, “You sure you won’t take this sword?”

“No way! Seriously, I appreciate that you’d be willing to give it to me, but I can’t take a gift that expensive. Talk to me when you’re a billionaire, then I’ll take any kind of gift you wanna toss my way.” She laughed and nudged Juliet’s shoulder with her fist playfully. “I have an idea. While we’re traveling toward Luna, do you want to do some basic sword drills? Might as well start learning, hmm?”

“Sure, but, I mean, I never saw myself as graceful enough to use something like a sword . . .”

“You’re joking, right?” Honey looked up at her, shaking her head in disbelief. “You’re like a damned cat on the mat. I don’t know what kind of dysmorphia or whatever you’ve saddled yourself with, but you are very graceful, you wire-brained goof.”

“You think so?” Juliet smiled shyly, suddenly in the mood to fish for more compliments.

“I wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true.” Honey sat down on the empty acceleration couch and said, “Tell me about your plans with these guys. What’s the story? They all related?”

“Well, Shiro and Alice are married, and Aya is Shiro’s cousin. Bennet’s a guy they hired some years back, but he’s pretty close with ‘em all.”

“And you’re into this?” Honey waved her hand around, indicating the ship they were in and, likely, the bigger ship outside. “I mean the cargo and scrap hauling stuff?”

“Finding salvage is a lot more exciting than you might think. That’s where we got this gunship; it was a salvage tip Alice bought from an old contact. When we got there, I had to fight off some pirates, and, yeah, it was extremely damn exciting. Hah, I can’t believe I just called it exciting. It was gut-twisting, nerve-wracking, stressful as hell.”

“And you loved every second of it.” Honey reached over and squeezed her forearm, and Juliet couldn’t find the will to disagree. “So, they want to fix up the gunship for what?” Honey frowned, trying to do the math. “To sell it?”

“That’s one possibility, but the other is for one of us, or, I guess, a pilot we hire, to fly it as an escort. As I said, some salvage jobs, especially the good ones, can get pretty hot.”

“Who’s the pilot for the big ship, the salvage ship?”

“That’s Alice. She used to be an interceptor pilot. She doesn’t like combat, though—swore not to put guns on the *Kowashi* . . .”

“But she’s cool with having an actual gunship following them around?” Honey finished Juliet’s own thought.

Frowning, Juliet nodded and said, “Yeah, not exactly consistent, is it? I should talk to her about it, about what changed, and what her real goals are before we sign anything . . .”

“What kinda things would you sign?” Now Honey sounded truly concerned.

“Relax, Honey! I’m not a dummy. I might invest some of my money into the operating business for the gunship. I’d receive a percentage of ownership that way. Before you ask, no, they didn’t sell me on this deal; I kind of pushed myself into it.”

“Just be careful, J. That’s all I’m saying. Have a good long talk with them, and do some more research about how hard it might be to fix this beast up and what kind of value you’ll see for your money. Heck, I want you to be happy, so I say if everything looks good, go for it. On the other hand, I want you to be alive and not get ripped off, so, like, be careful.” She sounded so sincere and so much like her old friend, the one she’d had breakfast with almost every day for months, that Juliet felt her eyes watering again.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Honey. I’m sorry I gave you a hard time about Lilia . . . hey, where is she?”

“She likes to sit in the cockpit. Most of the time, she’s really preoccupied with her . . . job, I guess is the right word, and the peace and quiet up there suits her. I should probably go check on her, though.”

“Right. Well, I’ll go see if I can track Alice down. Probably a good idea to hammer out some of the details before I start sending her all my money. Thanks.” Juliet hefted the bag with her mechanical arm and turned toward the doorway.

“Your welcome, and, hey, I’m glad I’m okay too.”