

Juliet winced as she pushed herself upright, slowly, shifting on the surgical table until she was sideways, her bare legs and feet hanging down under the soft, sanitary blanket and sheets Angel's mech had used to dress the bed. Looking down, head swimming, she saw more than half a dozen glued incisions surrounded by the reddish-orange stain of antiseptic gel on her lower extremities. Most were near her knees and ankles, but she knew she'd find more if she lifted the blanket. Angel had said she'd need those laparoscopic incisions in forty-eight strategic locations so the autosurgeon could weave the synthetic, augmented muscle and tendon fibers with her natural ones.

"Carefully, Juliet. You're going to be unsteady on your feet for a while." The aforementioned mech whirred and clanked as it stepped closer to the table, offering her its sturdy arm to lean on.

"Why . . ." Juliet licked her lips, gathered some saliva, and swallowed before trying again, "Why are my legs and arms covered with bruises?"

"Not only your legs and arms! The incisions were small, but the autosurgeon had to insert surgical rods to reach tissue up to twenty-five centimeters from some of them. Obviously, that resulted in some capillary and small vein damage. Your new nanite suite is speeding your healing along nicely, however. Without them, you'd be bedridden for a week."

Juliet grunted in response, holding onto the mech's arm and sliding off the bed so her bare feet touched down on the cool plasteel flooring. She didn't have to ask how long she'd been under; her AUI provided that information. "Twelve hours. Am I just groggy from the meds?"

"That and the ordeal your body went through. As much as we downplay cybernetic augmentation, you had several major surgeries. By the way, do you notice any differences in your breathing?"

Juliet froze; she'd almost forgotten that she was inhaling with synthetic lungs. She stood a little straighter and took a deep breath, noticing nothing different about the sensation. "My chest is sore, but only on the surface. Breathing feels good."

"That's great news. Don't be alarmed by the incision mark along your sternum—with the laser scalpel and modern wound bonding techniques, you won't have a scar."

"So, I'm guessing everything went well, or you'd have said something by now."

"Everything went perfectly. You aren't noticing any strange odors?"

Juliet paused again, taking a prolonged, slow inhalation through her nose. "Uh, well, now that you mention it, things seem a little too fresh. It smells like it just rained in here."

"I thought you'd enjoy that as you woke. Your new olfactory implants are very robust. I can make even the most unpleasant odors seem completely different!"

Juliet chuckled and bent to pick up the soft white robe she'd earlier found in one of the med bay cabinets. As she carefully pulled it on, gingerly extending her arms into the sleeves, she said, "Well, don't make all the best smells commonplace; otherwise, I'll stop appreciating them. I think normal odors are fine most of the time, okay?"

“An excellent observation! I’ll slowly allow this fresh scent to fade. The ship’s air filtration is excellent in any case.”

“Thanks for everything, Angel.” Juliet cinched the belt, pleased that, if nothing else, all of her limbs and digits seemed to be working just fine. “How soon until I can try out the new reflexes?”

“We should give the synthetic muscle and tendon fibers at least a week to bond fully. Until then, I’ll keep them powered off so you don’t have to worry about accidentally activating them.”

“Speaking of power, where are the batteries?”

“In your femurs. They’re rod-shaped and less than a centimeter in diameter.”

Juliet looked at the surgical bed and saw the mech was already bundling up her bedding to be washed. “You’re good with the cleanup?”

“Yes, it’s not a problem. If you’d like to go to your quarters, the acceleration couch would be . . .”

“Uh-uh. I don’t wanna lay down right now. I’ll go up to the bridge and see what’s up.” She knew very well that Angel could give her a full update on everything. Still, she wanted to wander around a little. “Can you have that mech bring me a drink or something when he’s done washing sheets?”

“Of course. By the way, you have two messages. One from Antigone that was sent to Lacy Blake’s encrypted address and one from Bennet.”

“All right. Play Antigone’s while I walk to the bridge.” Juliet kept walking, slow and shuffling, toward the lift, and an image of Antigone in her corporate heiress style—curly auburn hair with blond highlights, subdued makeup, expensive, tailored suit jacket and blouse—appeared on her AUI.

She spoke calmly and quickly, getting right to the point, “Lacy, just wanted to drop you a note to let you know everything went well. My father’s out of the picture for now, but there are many people with a lot of money and various strings attached to him. He’ll likely make it to the trial.” Her upbeat expression fell, and she sighed. “Imagine that. I actually feel a little relief saying that, despite all he’s done. Anyway, his law firm dumped him, but we couldn’t get to all his accounts in time to leave him without means. Eventually, he’ll find someone willing to work for him, and things will come to light, though he’s lost almost all credibility.

“He doesn’t have any evidence to support his claims of innocence, and, well, we have plenty. That’s thanks to you—the murdered crew of the *Humpback* might be the crime that brings him down. The security team you found footage of doing the deed has been cooperating with the prosecution, and their chief operator kept records. Looks like dear old Dad may end up going down for contracted mass murder. Anyway, Lacy, that’s about all I have for you. I’m not dumb; I’m pretty sure “Lacy” was a cover ID, but I suppose it’s safer for everyone that I don’t know who you really are. Maybe that can change someday. In any case, I’d love to hear from you anytime. You have my secure contact info. Take care.”

Juliet stepped off the lift and shuffled up the long, straight corridor toward the bridge. “Well, that was kind of nice.” She frowned and added, “I’m sure she knows her dad hired a subcontractor to build up Lacy’s identity. What do you think that was all about?”

“I have a theory I’ve been meaning to share . . .”

“Go on.” Juliet wondered why Angel was hesitating.

“I think perhaps Lacy Blake is or was a real person. I think Rodric Barrington also had her killed so that you could have a truly authentic cover.”

“Oh.” Juliet sighed and rubbed her fingers through her hair. It was longer than when she’d been playing her Lacy role, hanging down past her ears in a layered shag cut. “I hope that’s not the case. From what I know about Lacy, she wasn’t a nice person, but I hate to be responsible for anyone’s murder, even someone like her.”

“You aren’t responsible. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. I hate how . . . I hate how some of these people use other people as commodities. It’s not just the corpos, either. The pirates were pretty bad. I think it boils down to desperation and control. People like Rodric want to control their environment, which means anyone outside their circle is seen as a threat or a means to an end. The pirates, street gangs, scavengers—they’re all kept on a desperate edge of life and death. When you’re like that, when you’re not sure if you’ll run out of air or food or places to hide, you’ll do terrible things to make it to the next day.”

“That’s true for the average pirate or gangster, but the bosses aren’t like that. They’re little better than Rodric in that regard.”

“Yeah, good point, Angel. I won’t be forgiving Mary Moon anytime soon.”

“People are complicated. I don’t think you can summarize or generalize why so many turn out bad. Before you met me, you were working your life away, barely meeting your needs for survival, but you didn’t behave unethically. You’ve made friends with plenty of others with functioning moral compasses. To steal a rather old idiomatic expression, don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

“Hah! I like that.” Juliet gingerly lowered herself into the pilot’s acceleration couch. “Definitely some babies worth keeping. Speaking of worth keeping, play me Bennet’s message, will you?”

Bennet’s face appeared on her AUI, and began speaking, “Yo, Lucky. I heard you had a pretty rough time up there. Up? Is that right? I mean, to get to you, I’d have to go up off this moon, so yeah, I guess you are up from me. Anyway, I heard you had a rough time. I’m really sorry to hear about your friend. Uh, I got your message a while back about keeping all the exterior armor plating off the gunship.” Juliet frowned and paused the message.

“Did I tell Bennet to keep the armor off the gunship?”

“You told me, and I sent him a message. We were speculating about trying to refurbish the Takamoto repair nanites with the tech on this medical ship.”

“Ah, that’s right.” Juliet pressed play, and the message continued.

“It’s not a problem, anyway—still working on the drive systems and rebuilding some of the maneuvering jets. Aya’s been sanding down all the plating and replacing the sections that aren’t up to spec, the ones that are too thin, too damaged, or repaired too many times. I was wondering, what color do you want the ship to be? Aya’s throwing primer on all the plating after she cleans it up, and we figured we could get started with the base color, at least. Everyone agrees that it’s your call. How does that sound? I mean, Alice said something about you sending an interceptor our way, but we were thinking we’d sell it. You don’t mean to fly that instead of the gunship, do you?”

He paused and rubbed a thick thumb at a grease smudge on his cheekbone, and Juliet could see the wheels turning in his head as he thought of what to say next. “Well, we miss you a lot. We’re anxious to get you home, and Alice said the last time you messaged, you said something about having to finish things up around there. She seemed worried, so I’m worried, too. How about a message, huh?” He forced a smile and offered a quick wave, and then the recording ended.

“Oh no, Angel! I should have messaged them days ago! Ugh! I’m such a jerk sometimes.”

“You’re not a jerk! You’ve been busy and . . . well, okay, you and I both should have thought to send a message before now.”

“Let’s send one now. I want to tell them about the *Lady Hawk* and . . .” Juliet frowned and thought about what she was going to say. Did she want to burden them with knowledge of the medical ship? Athena was a big deal, and the more people who knew about her or the ship she was hiding in, the more she was at risk. Juliet had to take that responsibility seriously. “Angel, can you rent us a private hangar on Luna? Something under an alias that no one can connect to me. We should park the *Furies’ Wing* there, and I don’t think we need to tell anyone about her. Not right now, anyway.”

“I think that’s wise. If you land the *Wing* and secure her in your hangar, we can hire a shuttle to bring us out to the *Lady*, and then you can land her at the port. No one needs to know you didn’t travel all the way in that vessel.”

“Okay, that’s settled, then. Let’s compose a message to the crew. Go ahead and send it to all of them.”

“Ready.”

“Hey, everyone. I’m so sorry I didn’t get back to you a few days ago when things settled down. I’ve been in transit and decompressing. It’s not a good excuse. You all were worried, and I should have told you immediately when I was safe. Well, long story short, I’ll be home in five days or so, and, Alice, I have the *Lady Hawk*. Nick left her to his nephew, and the little creep didn’t appreciate her at all. I bought her from him. I guess that means go ahead and sell the *Sharp Lady*. Yeah, if you’re wondering, Nick named that ship, too. Um, I’ve got no interest in that pirate frigate, so if you want to sell it so we can put more money into the gunship or the *Kowashi*, then I’m fine with that.

“I plan to fly the gunship, but, and Alice, you know this: the *Lady Hawk* is very special. We should keep her for . . . options. Bennet, Aya, please start painting the armor plating for the gunship a soft, sky blue—something you might see on a clear day out over a cornfield. I’ve never seen cornfields, but I figure there’s some nice blue sky over ‘em, yeah? I have an idea for

some more . . . decorative paint, but we'll wait 'til she's all buttoned up before we go down that road." Juliet winked and grinned, knowing Angel was capturing her face with the camera on her pilot console.

"I really miss you all, and I'm looking forward to being home. See you soon, but if you want, send me some more messages; the delay will only get smaller from here!" Juliet stopped the recording and sighed, a pleasant feeling in her chest and a lot less weight on her shoulders. She closed her eyes and leaned back into the acceleration couch, then noticed an icon blinking on her AUI. "What's this?"

"I thought you'd like to see how I rated your new Cybergen equipment and the values for your musculoskeletal and cardiovascular rankings." Juliet started to object, but before she'd even opened her mouth, the icon expanded to fill her vision, and she found herself reading through Angel's notations about Juliet's comparative status on Angel's mystery database.

Juliet Corina Bianchi		
Physical, Mental, and Social Status Compilation:		Comparative Ranking Percentile (higher is better - previous value in parenthesis):
Liquid Assets Net Worth:	Sol-bits: 502,456	--
Neural and Cellular Adaptiveness:	.96342 (scale of 0 - 1)	99.91
Synaptic Responsiveness:	.19 (lower is better)	79.31
Musculoskeletal Ranking:	–	84.03 (75.49)
Cardiovascular Ranking:	–	90.77(76.88)
Cybernetic and Bionic Augmentation:	Model Name and Number:	Overall Rating of the Augmentation (Grades are F, E, D, C, B, A, S, S+):
PAI	WBD Project Angel, Alpha 3.433	S+
Psionic Lattice	Grave Technologies, GIPEL	S
Data Port	Prime Data Systems, Archwizard 2109.v3	A
Data Jack	Bio Network Solutions, 8840	C
Medical Nanite Suite	Cybergen Nanomedical Repair Matrix, Model 9	A+
Retinal Cybernetic Implant	Mirage Tech, Lux Alpha 12	A-
Auditory Cybernetic Implant	Cybergen Auditory Implant, Model 47	A+
Olfactory Cybernetic Implant	Cybergen Advanced Olfactory Sensor Array, Model 23B	A+

Cybernetic Prosthetic Right Arm with Fully Programmable Fingerprints	BioFusion, Model 2109.01b	A
Complete Cybernetic Lung Replacement	Cybergen Enhanced Pulmonary Implant, Model 17	A+
Full-body Enhanced Reflex Package	Cybergen Kinetic Response Amplifier, Model 3C	A+
Intracranial Blood Cooling System	Angel Systems - Bespoke Design	A
Programmable Synthetic Hair	Alicia Designs, Chroma Tresses v.4	B+
DNA Spoofing Package - Saliva	WBD - Custom Model	C
No other augmentation detected.	—	—

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Rachel watched Kline approach through the camera feed on her AUI. He didn't look like he was in a bad mood. His face was neutral, his eyes untroubled beneath his heavy, sandy blond eyebrows. He looked sharper than the last time he'd stopped by; his suit was clean, and the shirt pressed. His hair was styled, and the stubble she'd wondered about was gone. She'd thought maybe he would grow a beard, a significant power play in WBD corporate politics. The old lady frowned on facial hair. Rachel touched the mic button on the console, "Are we ready?"

The lab tech inside the test room lifted his left hand, thumb in the air. The subject frowned, looking confused, but Rachel didn't care if she knew what was happening. It would be better if she didn't, in fact. She touched the button again. "He's in the building. Five minutes." After a brief breathing exercise, trying to calm her nerves, lower her blood pressure, and stop the nervous perspiration in her armpits, she stood up and turned to face the door. She was the only one in the little observation room, but that was by design; the demonstration required it. She tracked Kline's progress through the building, down the elevator, and then through the narrow, white-painted hallways to her door.

With a beep and *whoosh*, the door opened, and he stepped in. "Kline." She held out a hand. He took it and shook it warmly, smiling.

"Rachel. Been too long."

"Just about two months. I love how that worked out, by the way."

"Hmm?"

"You had the hot tip about Seattle, but I got left here hunting rumors down."

Kline chuckled and shrugged out of his coat, slinging it on the back of a chair. He approached the viewscreen and stared at the two people sitting in the test room. "It's not like I was twiddling

my thumbs. Came up empty in New Vegas. Remind me to track down the banger who gave us that tip!"

"What about New York? I should tell you people are speculating that you're using these 'tips' as an excuse to travel on the company card."

"Hah! 'People,' huh? No, Rachel, but I'll let you in on a little secret, just between you and me." He turned and winked at her.

"What's that?"

"There wasn't a tip about New York. I requested leave to go to an addiction facility. Finally kicked the nicotine."

Rachel snorted and reached up to cover her mouth, turning while her cheeks bloomed in embarrassment. "Sorry!" she laughed, "You caught me off guard."

"You think I'm joking? I was in treatment!" Kline feigned mock outrage, and Rachel laughed all the more.

"You think I'm that gullible? The old lady wouldn't stand for anyone displaying the slightest hint of mental weakness. Addiction isn't a thing she believes in."

"Are you suggesting the corporate line about mental health being a top priority at WBD isn't sincere?" Kline pulled out one of the two chairs and sat down. "All right, enough nonsense. It's good to see you, but please tell me you've found something worth the trip. Speaking of the old lady, we need to show some progress soon or . . . well, you know."

"I think you're going to be pleased." Rachel moved to sit beside him. "You see that woman there, across from our technician?"

"Yep. One of the missing Grave subjects?"

"I know you're guessing based on why I'm up here, but yes." Rachel regarded the woman. She had wan, pale flesh, dark, sunken eyes, and short, curly black hair that looked like it could use a good washing.

"She looks a little out of it."

"She doesn't sleep well. We've only had her a few days, but, well, I won't spoil anything." Rachel touched the microphone button again. "We're ready for you to begin."

The tech looked at the camera, nodded, then turned to the woman. His voice came through the speaker, just a little crackly at first, but the software smoothed it out. "Abby, are you ready?" Abby licked her lips, clearly dry and cracked, and nodded quickly. "Nothing hard, nothing you need to worry about, okay? No pressure. Two people are on the other side of that wall where the camera is. I want you to tell me their genders."

Kline shifted beside her, clearing his throat, but Rachel held up a hand, "Be patient."

Abby closed her eyes, and Rachel saw her take a deep breath. Then, almost immediately, she said, “A man and woman.”

“Good. Okay, Abby, I want you to forget about the woman. Tell me what’s going on in the man’s head. What’s he thinking about?”

“What the . . .”

“Shh!” Rachel reached over and grasped Kline’s hand where it rested on the arm of his chair.

“He’s . . .” Abby’s voice was halting at first, then she began to speak quickly, almost like a stream of consciousness, “He’s thinking he likes her touch. She has warm fingers, and he’s glad to be with her. He’s spent time away. Yeah, he’s been away, and he wasn’t having fun. Someone, he calls her the old lady, had him doing something . . . He had to kill someone. A woman—blond hair, shiny eyes—she begged, and it really messed him up . . .”

Kline reached forward and slammed the mic button, “Enough.” He looked at Rachel and growled, “What the fuck, Rachel?”

Part of Rachel was battling to contain the euphoria of a successful demonstration, while another part was horrified about what the woman had seen in Kline’s head. “Something else, isn’t she?”

“This is what Grave was doing?”

“Seems like it. She was one of the subjects on their database. Corpo-sec at a local native casino picked her up. She was cleaning them out. They registered her DNA, and we flagged it.” Rachel gestured to the woman, rocking back and forth, hands on the sides of her head. “She’s a little unstable, but we’re starting to build a picture of what was going on with Grave’s GARD department. I still haven’t been able to tie anything to, you know, J. Shit, though, Kline, this is big stuff. If we can start to figure out GARD’s methodology, we might be able to replicate some of this.”

Kline leaned back, and Rachel wasn’t the least bit surprised when he fished a Nikko-vape out of his pocket. He sucked on it for a second, then, as he exhaled a strawberry plume, said, “This might buy us some leeway with the old lady. Yeah. Holy shit, she dug right into me. I was actively trying *not* to think about that stuff.” His eyes, unfocused as he thought things through, refocused on Rachel. “You have anything else to chase down here?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, get everything, her included, packed up, and we’ll get back to Phoenix. I’ve had some AI sifting through the remnants of the Grave databases. Maybe we can put something together. What’s the deal with her anyway? Was it a drug?”

“As I said, she’s unstable, but it sounds like a combination of drugs and tech. With the right kind of scan, you can see the stuff they put into her head. She keeps calling it a gipple, whatever that means.”

“Gipple, huh? Sounds funny, but maybe it’ll lead to something. If she’s here, there must be more of them, don’t you think? Now we have an idea of what to look for.” He stared at the ceiling, stroking his jaw for a minute. “Yeah, this ought to keep the old . . . Mrs. Gentry off our backs for

a little while." He sucked on the vape again and gestured toward the view screen. "Better stop thinking of her as the old lady now that you've got people reading our minds."