

Sometime after midnight, Juliet slipped out of the hangar and, with the simulated engine noise turned off, silently sped off through the empty streets toward the interdome highway. She was wearing a black turtleneck tucked into her darkest pair of blue jeans, her combat boots, and slung in a snug shoulder holster, her newest pistol, a needler similar to the one she'd given to Aya, but built by a different manufacturer, Nighthawk Arms. Of course, she could have gotten her needler back from Aya, but it didn't take much of an excuse for Juliet to pick up a new gun. She'd had her eyes on one of the Nighthawk needlers ever since she'd seen a particularly compelling advertisement back on Callisto.

They were built on a slimmer frame with advanced polymers and had built-in suppressors that were, supposedly, up to fifty percent more effective than aftermarket models like the one on her Finch needler. What had sold Juliet on the pistol was more than the silencer, though—her Finch was damn quiet already. The Nighthawk was like a higher-tech version of the Finch. The gun had a battery built into the grip, a slender, high-capacity thing that sat right beside the needle magazine. The battery allowed the electronic trigger and firing mechanism to work, and with the right ammo, the shots were utterly silent—not even a click. When Juliet first tested it, she thought something had been wrong when she tapped the smart-trigger pad. She'd felt a tiny vibration but couldn't believe that was the shot going off. It was.

She'd loaded the needler with proprietary botu-rounds but also carried a magazine of shredders, just in case. She wasn't planning to shoot anyone that night but wanted to be ready in case things went sideways. Of course, she had her vibroblade—freshly serviced and sharpened—tucked into her boot and another identical but much newer one in her wrist sheath. She'd opted not to wear any armor—this was a stealth, information-gathering mission, and she didn't want to look like a shock trooper if someone found her looking around Evan Lopez's place.

When she got to the interdome highway and goosed her bike's throttle, sending her guts into a thrill-inducing loop in her belly, she leaned into it and really pushed the bike, her grin widening as the hydrogen cell kicked in and the bike ripped through its powerband, sending her virtual speedometer rapidly ramping toward the far-right corner of the dial. Of course, even at midnight, she soon came to a cluster of traffic and had to slow down, but it had been fun for a few minutes. Over the last week, she'd learned that the speed limits were loosely enforced on certain stretches of the interdome highways, and she'd never even seen a traffic drone on that particular stretch.

Angel often said it was only a matter of time until she passed the wrong person, but Juliet had a dozen solid false IDs; if a corpo-sec pulled her over, she'd pay the fine and move on; it wasn't like she had a warrant. "Not yet," she muttered, her mind drifting to the night's planned activities. Of course, a part of her wondered if this was some sort of elaborate trap. Had Hines set her up? Was a max-threat SWAT team standing by to catch her in the act of breaking into a cop's apartment? If so, Hines had displayed some world-class subterfuge, hiding his ill intent from Juliet's mental snooping and pulling off some theater-worthy acting. She wasn't too worried; before she did anything illegal, she and Angel would have a good look around.

"Are you tired?" Angel asked as Juliet angled the bike toward the offramp leading into the city proper.

"Not really. If I was, that little sprint woke me up." She'd drunk a few beers with the crew, but her nanites had made short work of the alcohol, and she'd been staying up late lately, so she wasn't feeling the need to crawl into bed anytime soon. Thinking of rest and the late hour brought her upcoming appointment with Dr. Ladia to mind. "What time's my appointment on Tuesday?"

“Eleven. You asked me to schedule it after your sword practice.”

“Right. I’ll still need to leave a little early, in any case. Usually not out of the showers until about eleven thirty.”

“Yes, but it was the best Ladia could do unless we wanted to move the appointment to Thursday.”

Juliet pressed her boot onto her rear brake pedal, almost breaking into a slide as she rapidly slowed to catch a turn she almost missed. “That’s fine. I’ll go in a little early and tell Tanaka he can torture me before class instead of after.”

“Shall I message Frida so she can give him time to prepare some extracurricular . . .”

“No!” Juliet laughed inside her helmet. “I’ll tell him after class on Monday. Let’s not give him too much time to prepare something diabolical.”

“I doubt he would! I imagine you’ll just get some extra time in the VR simulator.” Angel, true to form, was quick to defend Tanaka, and Juliet found it kind of sweet. She wondered how long she’d stay smitten with the man. Surely, some of the shine had to be wearing off by now. She glanced at her route and ETA, saw she still had nine minutes of travel time, and said, “Try to open a connection to Applebaum. Let’s see if he picks up.”

Angel didn’t reply, but a connection attempt tone began to sound, and, on the third tone, a vid screen appeared showing Applebaum’s grinning face. He was sitting in a restaurant or bar; his PAI hadn’t blurred the background, and Juliet could see industrial décor and a neon sign advertising Crater Beers. “Decided to come out, after all?”

“Not tonight, but I wanted to know if you’d firmed up any plans for tomorrow. Trying to plan the rest of my weekend.”

“Thought you were going to wait for Frida to call. I tried to tell you my plans this morning when you left me in a cloud . . . Hey!” He laughed, waving to someone off-camera.

“Caught you at a bad time?” Juliet smirked.

He glanced back into the camera, a sloppy grin on his face, and she realized he was probably well on his way to being drunk. “I’m out!”

“Okay, I’ll wait for Frida’s call.” Juliet started to gesture to close the call, but his eyes widened, and he waved a hand.

“Wait, wait! We’re going to Holo Wars—if you tell me you’ll come, I’ll adjust the reservation.”

“Holo wars?”

“Yeah, check out their net page and hit me up if you wanna come. The sooner, the better ‘cause there are only so many slots per session. Surprised Frida hasn’t called you yet.”

“I’ll message you . . .”

“Great!” He grinned and cut the call, and Juliet groaned; he’d really enjoyed that.

Angel was of the same mind. “He relished cutting that call on you.”

“Oh, he definitely did.” Juliet chuckled, downshifting and turning down a street called Voyager. “What’s holo wars?”

“Holo Wars is a company that hosts squad combat matches. From the advertisements on their page, it looks like they have an industrial-sized VR room equipped with Dream Helmets—smaller, portable dream-rig equipment.”

“That actually sounds kind of fun. Will you set a reminder to let him know we want to come? Send it around eight in the morning, though.”

“You don’t want to seem too eager?”

“Well, he just cut the call on me! I want him to stew on that for a while.” Juliet stopped talking for a while; she was getting close to Evan’s address and wanted to be on high alert. His place turned out to be in a four-unit townhouse building. It was tall and narrow, built of concrete and glass. The townhomes—apartments if you asked Juliet—were arranged with two ground-floor units and two on the second story. Evan’s was the upstairs unit on the right as you faced the building. Juliet drove by slowly, panning her head left and right, letting Angel take a good long look around using all the spectrums her retinal implants could pick up, including her AI-assisted terahertz scanning to see into the nearby vehicles.

“Nothing seems suspicious. There are people about, but I don’t detect anything unusual, nor do I see any signals or jammers that are out of place.”

“All right. Once around the block, then I’ll find a spot to park.” Evan lived in the main dome, but he wasn’t close to downtown. There were plenty of spots on the street where she could wedge her bike between other vehicles. She cruised around the block, the only person driving around there at that hour. While she rode, Angel highlighted several surveillance drones in the area; she’d been building a map of their flight patterns by tracing their pings. There were undoubtedly some drones up there flying dark, avoiding any signal output, but Juliet wasn’t too worried about those. She didn’t intend to look suspicious enough to warrant close observation, and there was no way any electronic surveillance of her would come back to cause any trouble—Angel was, as usual, cycling false IDs.

“I’ll park, then you tell me when the best moment is, and I’ll hurry up to his place.” On her first drive-by, she’d scanned his door and the access panel beside it. Hines had already given her Evan’s passcode, or, at least, the one he’d been using the last time Hines had been over to water his plants. With that knowledge and pre-loaded hacks for the panel, Juliet didn’t think Angel would take long to open it, even if young Mr. Lopez had changed the code. She silently pulled her bike in front of a small two-seat economy vehicle, lowered the kickstand, and got ready to jump into action.

She wasn’t carrying her practice sword, so she didn’t have to worry about catching it on things. She knew Tanaka would have some way to tell she hadn’t kept it with her, but she figured she’d rather deal with his punishment than lug the unsharpened blade around on a real mission. In preparation for a stint as a cat burglar, she’d purchased some new, synthetic fabric gloves that

were supposed to wick moisture into pads on the knuckles, not allowing any to seep through on the pads of her fingers and palms. They were comfortable, that was for sure, and she methodically opened and closed them, feeling the thin, flexible fabric tighten and release while she waited for Angel's go-ahead.

"Now!" Angel said, startling her by speaking at almost the exact moment Juliet had thought about how she was waiting for her to speak. Nevertheless, she leaped into motion, walking quickly, softly stepping on the concrete steps. She hurried past the downstairs neighbor's place and onto the landing in front of Evan Lopez's door. Rather than try the code Hines had given her, she plugged in her cable, knowing Angel could try it much faster than she could type it out.

She'd barely inserted the prong for her cable before the panel beeped, a green light flashed, and the door clicked unlocked. Juliet yanked the cable and turned the handle, stepping inside. She still wore her helmet, but it had a very high-end AUI and camera system; it didn't hinder her vision while providing side and rear views for Angel to monitor. More than that, it helped Juliet's confidence; she liked the separation the visor gave her from the world. It was almost like she was a little removed from what she was doing and could be more analytical about things. All that said, when she stepped into Evan's dark apartment, and the lights gradually brightened on their own, she almost didn't notice because of the adjustments her helmet's visor made.

Her optics did the same thing but were smoother and allowed some cues to pass through, keeping her informed of the natural lighting. The helmet was designed to keep lighting stable in traffic, no matter the input, so it sort of brute-forced the brightness, and it wasn't until soft music began to play that she realized the townhome had acknowledged her presence. "Does it think I'm Evan?" she asked, noting the soft, bluesy music emanating from hidden speakers.

"It seems so; his house AI doesn't have an active scanner. It's preparing the living quarters based on the entry code we used. The network passphrase from Hines worked. I'm currently editing the house AI and camera footage to remove any trace of your presence. It's a rather simple custodial program . . ." Juliet nodded, looking around as Angel continued to narrate her progress with the security system. Evan had just the sort of home furnishing taste you might expect from a young bachelor working for corpo-sec. The couches, tables, and chairs looked like they came from the same store, likely a big-box home furnishing supply depot.

She calmly walked around, taking in the living room's focal point—a dream-rig with a double-sized occupant pod. Even back in Tucson, Juliet's friends had talked about "dream dates," but none of them had been able to afford a decent rig, let alone a two-seater. Still, it was all the rage on the sitcom and drama feeds. It wasn't surprising that a moderately successful young man would want one. Idly, she wondered how successful he'd been with his dates, walking around the large pod, noting the dirty dishes on the nearby tables, the empty drink containers, and the tell-tale mix of men's and women's clothing tossed here and there.

"Not a tidy guy. I'd expected more type-A. So, what are we looking for? What did Hines say? 'Get to him?' I was hoping we'd find something, but all I see are dirty dishes, clothes, and entertainment chips. Anything on the house net?"

"Nothing. He has it set to format footage every twenty-four hours, and there's nothing from yesterday other than him coming home alone with a bag of takeout and sitting in the dream-rig. He fell asleep in it and woke up late for work. He was in quite a hurry to leave."

“Okay . . .” Juliet dragged the word out as she quietly walked around the townhouse. The kitchen was small and poorly stocked—nothing but energy drinks and beer in the fridge. The cupboards held an eight-piece place setting of plastic dishware and some mismatched silverware. She found a few bags of cereal and granola, and that was it. Evan’s bedroom had two pieces of furniture—a relatively high-end queen-sized mattress on the floor and a dresser with several drawers hanging open. Dirty clothes were piled here and there, and a pile of laundry that smelled fresh sat atop the mattress. “Doesn’t look like he sleeps in the bed very often.”

She entered the bathroom and saw a similar scene—toiletries for a man, with a few out-of-place items: a baby-powder-scented deodorant and a pink sonic toothbrush. “So, he has a girlfriend? Or maybe just had a girl over once or twice. Judging by the mess and the state of his bed, I don’t think she’s a regular.” There wasn’t another bedroom, so Juliet turned and walked back into the hallway, intent on giving the living room another close look. She’d traversed most of the distance when she stopped and frowned. “What’s the deal here? Why’s this hallway so long?” It seemed to her there had to be a lot of dead space in the walls between the bedroom and living room.

“I believe you’re on to something. This townhome should have two bedrooms.” Angel began switching through the various filters on her ocular implants, and Juliet looked left and right down the hallway wall while her vision flickered through different spectrums. After a minute, Angel said, “There’s something behind that photo frame.”

“Of course,” Juliet stepped toward the little LCD panel displaying random images of Evan and his friends and family. It was a good-sized frame, prominently displayed in the hallway across from the guest bathroom. Juliet guessed it was about 40 centimeters on a side, and the images were bright and vivid. Running her fingers along the edges, she felt a hinge on the left side, so she pulled the right-hand side away from the wall. It swung away, revealing a recessed keypad. “Um, did Hines mention something like this in his message?”

“No! I can’t imagine he would omit this detail if he’d known about it.”

“I mean, not if he wanted us to find something.” Juliet flicked out her vibroblade and used it to pry the panel cover off, looking for a data port. She found one tucked under a bundle of wires and plugged her cable into it. “What do you see?”

“I see ICE that’s far more sophisticated than what was on the home network. This might take a while.”

“There’s no connection to this panel through the local network?”

“Nothing. It is air-gapped.”

Juliet drummed her gloved fingers against the wall while she stood there, waiting. “What are you getting up to, Evan Lopez? Pretty weird for a young corpo-sec officer to have a secret room in his townhome, isn’t it?” A million years ago, when she was a scrapyard wage-bot, she might have believed every corpo-sec employee had something like this hidden away in their apartment. She knew better now, though. She knew most corpo-sec grunts were little better off than the populace they policed. The big difference being that they had a little more freedom, a little more pay, and corporate benefits. That, and they had the willingness to drag their neighbors kicking and screaming to credit courts.

“I’m going to turn the lights and music off. I’ve reset the house AI to think no one is here.”

“Yeah, probably smart.” Juliet’s vision didn’t change much as the lights dimmed down—her implants and the helmet visor compensated for the darkness by enhancing the tiny amount of light from all the LEDs around the apartment and the diffuse city lights coming in through the living room windows. She turned back to the panel, leaning one shoulder against the wall and trying to be patient. Her mind ran through a million scenarios about what Evan Lopez might have hidden in his spare bedroom, but nothing made sense. He was just a street cop. Why would he need a room like this?

She felt the heat at the nape of her neck and knew Angel was working hard to bypass the ICE protecting the panel. She’d learned a lot about hacking through discussions with Angel and the practice scenarios she’d built before she’d gone undercover at Grave, but Juliet had concluded that it just wasn’t for her. Not only that, but no matter how good she got, she’d never be a match for Angel. Juliet preferred to stick to things she had a particular knack for, and so far, that seemed to be driving, flying, killing, and being damn lucky. “I guess I’m pretty good at pretending to be other people, too . . .” she muttered, just in time for the panel to beep and for a section of the seamless wall to noiselessly slide away to the right.

Juliet pulled her cable out and stepped toward the new opening, suddenly leery of the unexplored space. She reached for her needler, pulled it out, and carefully sidestepped, “slicing the pie” as she peered through the opening. Her caution paid off—she’d barely glimpsed the interior of the very dark room when a man with a plasteel face and two bright, silver-blue eyes dove through the opening, charging right for her. He was silent and very quick.

Angel was quicker, though, and she fired up Juliet’s synapses, cranking them to eleven. Juliet wasn’t sure how Angel turbo-charged her brain, but she had a hundred thoughts in the span of a heartbeat, from shock to chagrin to a dozen considered and discarded tactics. In the end, she whipped her pistol out straight, backpedaled, and tapped the trigger pad on the little needler half a dozen times, walking her shots down the man from his neck to his chest to his navel, hoping to hit something soft through his black jumpsuit. The needler vibrated, and puffs of air erupted from its tiny barrel. Juliet, dialed in like a coke fiend, saw the needles sprout in the man’s flesh and clothes, so she knew they’d hit home.

When she saw he was still coming, that he hadn’t even slowed, Juliet slammed the gun into her holster, still backpedaling, and yanked her vibroblade from her wrist sheath. Then, he was on her. He grabbed for her neck, but she’d drilled grappling far too much for that to work. She used her left hand to ward him off while she hacked downward with the buzzing knife. He was utterly silent as he lifted his left arm to take the blow, and the blade ripped through flesh and ground through plasteel, biting halfway through the limb. Juliet had learned not to let her knife get jammed up in a fight, so she jerked it back and waved it toward his face, trying to get him to back off.

The man kept coming, though, silently, doggedly, lashing out with his hands, trying to grab her, strike her, or push her off balance. By then, she’d gotten to the end of the hallway, with nowhere left to go unless she wanted to expose her flank to him as she darted for the bedroom door. Growling in frustration, Juliet leaned back into the wall and kicked out with her long, booted left leg. She was still wired up, her every move lightning-fast, but he was keeping up with her. Even so, she caught him in the lower midriff with her bootheel, and while he snatched at her ankle, trying to grab hold and throw her off balance, Juliet flicked the vibroblade and sent it spinning for

his face. It was a perfect shot, and she knew it would sink into his left eye, but then, almost faster than her hot-wired brain could track, he reached up and caught the blade.

Juliet might have been in trouble then, having armed her opponent, but she hadn't stood still. She hadn't counted on the blade hitting home. One thing Sensei and, lately, Tanaka had taught her was that in a fight, especially involving blades, you always had to be two steps ahead. She'd counted on the throw failing, even considered that he might catch it. She'd seen how fast he was, after all. So, as soon as it left her fingers, she reached for her needler, touched the mag release button, and, with her free hand, slammed the shredder magazine home. I might have taken her eight-tenths of a second.

Another lovely thing about the high-tech needler was that it cycled rounds electronically and automatically. As soon as the magazine sank into place, it loaded a round, and Juliet began tapping that trigger pad. The shredders weren't silent, but they weren't loud. They made a sound like *brrt, brrt, brrt* as she pumped twenty or so needles into her antagonist. He was still holding her ankle, lifting the freshly caught vibroblade high for a strike, when the first burst hit him in the neck.

The needles tore through, sending white fluid splashing out the back, and he staggered. Then Juliet's follow-up shots began to hit home, and soon he was lying on his back, thrashing, as milky fluid burbled out of his mouth and the dozens of tiny holes in his torso. Juliet stepped forward and snatched his wrist with her cybernetic arm, squeezing it until his plasteel bones ground together, and his fingers released her vibroblade. "Damn, he was fast!" she hissed, finally able to formulate a coherent sentence.

"Juliet! Plug me into his data port! Quickly, before he self . . ." Angel's words came too late as gray, acrid smoke erupted from the synth's ears, and his thrashing ceased. The scent of burning plastic filled her nose, and Juliet stood, waving away fumes.

"Sorry, Angel. Looks like we aren't getting anything out of this guy's head." Her AUI said she still had twelve shredder rounds in her gun, so she lifted it and started toward the open door to the secret room. "Let's see what the hell is going on in here."