

When Juliet cut through the thick chains holding the door open, she found it was still securely locked and had to spend another five minutes cutting through the bolt that held it locked in place. By the time she was done, the air was thick with the fumes of molten plasteel and metal. She applied the business end of her prybar to the heavy door and used her powerful plasteel arm to torque it open. She wasn't sure what she'd expected to see on the other side of the door as it squealed open on dry hinges, but a long, empty, dusty cement corridor was what greeted her.

She packed up her torch and her pry bar, shouldered her backpack, and started forward, the beam of her light blazing out of the business end of her SMG. The tunnel had a downward grade, and Juliet found herself moving quickly down it, kicking up clouds of ancient dust as her boots scuffed along the concrete. "I don't think anyone's used this tunnel for decades."

"The main New Atlas dome was constructed in the seventies, and people moved above ground as the first arcologies were constructed. You know the city is named for the Atlas Mining Consortium, yes? In the early days, Atlas employees comprised more than ninety percent of the population. Now they're less than one percent."

"Has the company declined, or have other interests just boomed?"

"A little of both, according to the reading I've done. Atlas Corp has failed to adapt to changing demands and, like most of the free cities in the Sol System, the population has boomed."

"Free?"

"A colloquialism that employs a very loose definition of the word. It's mainly used to describe cities that allow easy visa access and immigration."

Juliet was finding it hard to breathe in the sweltering tunnel, and she wondered at that. Why was it so hot? "Do you know where we are? Did Lemur give you a map of the underground?"

"Not exactly. I know your rough proximity to the railway, but I don't have an accurate map of these tunnels. Judging by the staleness of the air, you'll need to open another door before you're in the main network."

"Yeah. Stale is right." Juliet quickened her steps, confident she wouldn't be ambushed in the plain concrete tunnel with its decades of dust. According to the map display on her AUI, she'd walked nearly two kilometers and descended a hundred meters by the time she saw a dim, amber LED ahead. When she focused on it, her ocular implants zoomed in, and she saw another heavy plasteel door, much like the one she'd just cut through.

When she approached the door and saw that it was secured by a weld, not a chain or security panel, she unslung her pack and pulled out her torch again, for the first time wondering if she should have packed some spare canisters for the little device. She figured she'd only used about ten percent of the mix, but she could see she'd need about twice that much to cut this big weld, and if there were many more doors like this, she'd be in a pickle. "Nothing to do about it now. Here's hoping there aren't a ton of welded doors in my way."

"Here's hoping."

"That's it?"

“Hmm?”

“I was hoping you’d try to reassure me with factoids about how unlikely it would be to encounter many more welded doorways.”

When Angel didn’t reply, she frowned, sparked the torch to life, and started cutting. It was noisy, blinding work, and Angel had to dim her visor’s gain to protect the sensitive light receptors in her implants. Juliet lost herself in the task and was a little startled when, as she finished, Angel said, “I detected speech patterns from the other side of the door while you were cutting.”

“You’re telling me now?” Juliet rapidly stepped back, dropped the torch, and lifted the SMG.

“Would you have turned back?”

“Good point,” Juliet subvocalized, moving to the left, crouching low, and training the gun on the hot, ticking seam of the door, waiting to see if someone pushed it open. As the metal cooled and quieted, she hunkered there, patient, breathing steadily, knowing that anyone who might pose a threat could be waiting, just as patiently, for her to come through instead. She’d loaded her SMG with the same armor-piercing rounds she’d used on Dione and contemplated switching to her needler, filled with botu-rounds. She decided it would be too dangerous with an unknown adversary.

“How long will you wait?” Angel prompted after four minutes or so.

“Keep your ears open,” Juliet said, knowing it was an unnecessary directive but feeling better having said it. Then she lowered her gun and reached back, digging into the side pocket of her pack. She pulled out a black metal ball, just a bit smaller than a baseball, and set it on the ground beside her. “Fire it up,” she said.

A second later, a red LED blinked three times on the black ball, and then it sprouted eight telescoping legs, needle-thin and about six inches long. A moment later, a window appeared in her AUI, displaying a camera feed from the little spider drone. Along the bottom was a signal strength meter and a battery status—four out of four bars and 99%, respectively. “It’s ready,” Angel said.

Juliet lifted her gun again, then quietly padded toward the door. “I’ll crack the door, and you drive the drone through. See what’s over there.”

“Roger.”

Juliet smiled at Angel’s serious military affect. Then she grabbed the door’s handle, slowly tugging it on protesting hinges until a four or five-inch gap opened between it and the ancient plasteel doorjamb. As soon as the gap was wide enough, the little drone clicked through, its tiny legs pounding out a rapid staccato like someone lightly drumming knitting needles on the ground. Juliet backed up, watching the feed.

The dusty hallway continued past the door, though everything was in shades of green—the drone was using night vision, which meant the hallway was dark. Angel drove the drone forward, and Juliet saw a turn in the corridor to the left about twenty meters from the door. The

intersection was still dusty but not in the center, and Juliet could see the scuff marks of many feet. “Slowly,” she breathed as the drone rapidly clicked its way to the corner.

Angel knew what she was doing, and the drone froze right at the edge of the concrete junction, hugging the corridor wall. It paused there for several seconds and then carefully extended its multi-jointed legs until the camera was viewing the new corridor. Juliet instantly recognized the shapes of four crouching people. They were hugging the walls of the passage, two on a side, about ten meters from the junction. She saw they had goggles or visors on, and two of them clutched batons, while a third held a large-barreled gun—a shotgun, she figured—and the last one had a semi-automatic pistol aimed at the junction.

Angel almost instantly pulled the drone back, but she snapped a still image of the four lurkers first, putting it into another window for Juliet to analyze. The ambushers wore mismatched gear. None had helmets, and only one had any body armor, a bulky military-style vest. They all looked filthy, and the one with the pistol only had one arm. “I should have bought some grenades,” she subvocalized.

“I’m listening with the drone. They aren’t moving. Still, I can use the drone for targeting, and you could shoot around the corner with your plasteel arm.”

“They’ll hear me open the door.”

“They heard you open it this much, and they’re still waiting.”

“Well, as you said, I’m not leaving now.” Juliet grabbed the side of the big door and gave it a yank, opening it two feet with only a short squeal of protest, enough for her to slip through easily. She saw Angel nudge the drone forward again to peek down the corridor. She crouched before the door and watched the drone feed; the four ambushers hadn’t moved.

Juliet clicked off the light on her SMG, then let it hang at her side, yanking her needler from its holster. “Let’s make this perfect,” she subvocalized and quietly stepped toward the corner where the drone sat, a dark black lump against the base of the wall.

“Are you sure botu-rounds are the right move here,” Angel asked.

“No.” Juliet didn’t exactly think she was being clever, but she didn’t know these people. Maybe they were only going to threaten her and attempt to rob her; should she come out shooting lethal rounds on just that possibility? She supposed plenty of people, plenty of operators would, but she had enough dead people’s faces dancing through her mind at night when she tried to sleep. She wanted to keep their numbers from expanding as much as she could. She paused as she neared the corner and subvocalized, “Make sure they’re still waiting, then expand the drone’s feed window and put my crosshairs on it.”

“That was my plan,” Angel’s voice was terse, and Juliet knew she was worried. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, then edged the muzzle of her needler toward the corner, waiting for Angel to move the drone. She counted her heartbeats, one . . . two . . . three . . . and then the drone moved, its feed expanded, and Juliet fought the momentary disorientation as it suddenly felt like she was looking through the drone’s eyes.

Juliet quickly stuck her arm around the corner, lined up the crosshairs on the first lurker, aiming at his neck and chest area, squeezed the trigger, then moved to the next target, did the same,

and was about to move to the next when a thunderous boom sounded. She felt a numbing impact on her plasteel hand, and the needler was blown to pieces, parts of it flying against the wall to Juliet's right. She didn't have to yank her arm back; the impact of the shotgun did that for her. Little red lights populated the corner of her AUI where the limb's, usually transparent, status was displayed.

"Shit!" Juliet hissed, backpedaling and reaching to lift her SMG. Her hand felt clumsy and slow, and she struggled to figure out what was wrong, losing precious seconds before she realized she'd lost her trigger finger. A form darted around the corner, another *bang* sounded, and she felt a painful impact at the center of her chest and almost fell backward. "Dammit!" she cried, jamming her middle finger into the SMG's trigger guard, jerking it back, spraying the shooter and the wall behind him with armor-piercing, nine-millimeter rounds. He grunted, staggered back, and fell limply to his side. The shotgun discharged again, spraying buckshot into the wall, nowhere near Juliet, and then he lay still.

One thing Grave had drilled into her was that in a firefight, you couldn't stand still, couldn't hesitate when you had active enemies and no cover. She thought about retreating behind the door, but instead, she stepped to the right, hugging the wall and giving herself a broader angle on the corner. A dim memory came to her of a time when she didn't know better and failed to properly "slice the pie." She'd had plenty of time to learn better habits, though, and she edged around, gun ready, looking for the final ambusher. She'd just gotten to the last slice when, with a warbling cry, he charged at her, baton held high.

Juliet dropped the gun to hang from its sling, then, forming a four-fingered plasteel fist, she stepped forward, inside the arc of his swing, and punched him under the chin. His head snapped back, and he flopped onto his back, totally still. Juliet pounced on him, ripping one of the shrink-ties from her vest pocket and hastily securing his hands behind his back. She was clumsy with her damaged hand, but now that she knew her pointer finger was gone, she managed. When she finished with him, Juliet hurried to bind the hands of the two paralyzed ambushers.

The whole while she worked to secure them, Juliet berated herself for not prioritizing the shotgun-wielding lurker. She also felt a hot wave of embarrassed shame for opting to use her low-velocity toxin rounds when people with real guns were waiting, ready to shoot. It was a risk she shouldn't have taken, and she was glad Angel was the only witness to her hubris. "Don't say it," she said, knowing Angel wanted to reprimand her.

"I'm just glad you're ok."

Juliet held up her hand, frowning at the black fluid leaking from the bottom joint where her pointer finger was supposed to be. The hand's palm, thumb, and wrist were scored with bright plasteel grooves, the red enamel scraped away. Sighing, she looked at the mangled mess of her needler, then scooped it up, stuffing it into her pack; someone with enough patience might tie it to her through her SOA license. "That was a shit show."

While she'd been binding the ambushers, Juliet had seen, in the once-more-small window that displayed the drone's feed, that Angel had driven the spider down the passageway, bypassing two more junctions and that it was now observing a rather steep cement stairway. She paused to look more closely at the window, and it enlarged slightly with her attention. The drone sat on a landing of sorts near the top of an enormous, dimly illuminated tunnel. Several figures were

walking around near the base of the cement steps, but none seemed to be approaching the drone and the tunnel that led to where Juliet stood.

“That appears to be one of the main thoroughfares of Old Atlas. You should be able to find the railway to the Xanadu Dome less than a kilometer from the base of those steps.”

Juliet looked at her hand again, saw it was still leaking black fluid, and asked, “Should I turn back and get this looked at?”

“You could stop that leak with your cutting torch. Your finger is there,” Angel highlighted the forlorn digit lying near the assailant she’d killed with the SMG. “If you put it into the socket and fuse the plasteel, it will keep you from losing too much of the lubricant.”

“Is that what this stuff is? Lubricant?”

“Yes, it’s a specialized carbon-based polymer. If you lose too much, the limb’s joints will eventually suffer wear and damage from normal use.”

“Jeez,” Juliet sighed, holding her hand straight up over her head to keep more fluid from leaking out. Then she walked over and picked up her damaged finger. Grunting, she jammed and wriggled the digit into the hole it had left behind, and then she picked up her torch. She didn’t have the right kind of tip or flux to weld plasteel properly, but she knew if she got it hot enough and jammed it against the concrete wall, she could secure the finger in place.

She’d done just that, frowning at how she’d ruined her hand—her finger stuck straight out when she curled her other fingers—when one of the paralyzed ambushers started to stir. “Dammit,” she sighed. “What do I do with these guys? I don’t want them to break free before I leave this place.”

“I’m exploring the side tunnels nearby with the drone. Perhaps we can find a place to lock them.”

“Okay.” Juliet walked over to the bullet-riddled lurker and took his shotgun. It was an ancient, rusted piece of junk. She jacked the remaining three shells out of it, bent it against her knee until the barrel started to crack away from the stock, and tossed it against the wall. She stepped over to the guy she’d punched under the chin, saw he wasn’t moving at all, and felt for his pulse.

“He’s dead,” Angel said, displaying his temperature—far too low for a living person.

“Should have just shot him, I guess.” So far, she’d avoided looking at any of their faces and continued to do so, leaving the two dead bodies face down. The guy who’d started to groan and wriggle was facing the wall, his back to Juliet, and she walked over to him, placed a boot on his bound hands, and said, “If you don’t stay still, I’ll have to kill you.”

When he stopped moving and didn’t make a sound, she turned to the other man she’d shot with the botu-needles and checked his pulse. It was slow but steady. “Any luck?”

“I think I found something. Another sealed door, but smaller; I think it’s an old maintenance closet. The label has been scratched out, but there are brail imprints beneath it that I can just make out with the drone’s camera. I believe it says, ‘Custodian.’”

“All right.” Juliet stepped over to the man who’d stopped wriggling on her command and grabbed his upper arm. “Stand up,” she said, pulling. He groaned and staggered but managed to get his feet under himself, and she pushed him until his face was against the wall. “Don’t move.” As she stepped away, she saw he’d fallen atop his pistol, so she picked it up and stuffed it in the side pocket of her backpack. Angel had provided a label for it almost immediately—.45 ACP.

She nudged the other guy in the butt, pushing against his baggy, filthy, army-green jacket. “Get up.”

“Melt yourself,” he grunted.

“Listen, buddy; I’m trying to figure out a way not to kill you. You can cooperate, or I can fire a few more botu-rounds into you and leave it up to God.”

“Cold bitch,” he groaned, grunting with effort as he struggled to worm his way up to his knees without using his hands. Juliet held her SMG in her plasteel hand, training the muzzle on the guy who was already standing, and then she grabbed the other one by the jacket collar and hoisted, helping him to stand.

She backed up a few steps so the two were in her field of view and said, “All right. Start walking slowly. I’ll tell you where to go. I’m wasting precious time dealing with you idiots, and if you give me a reason to, I won’t feel too badly about sending one or both of you to escort your two dumb friends to whatever comes after this life.”