

Juliet walked down the long, sanitary white corridor, past several identical doors equipped with high-end security panels. She looked into the sensor array at the corridor junction, annoyed at the thought of people sitting in secretive rooms, observing her movements, her temperature, the things on and under her skin, and even the level of activity in her mind. She hurriedly turned to the right as though every second she stood under the gaze of those glass and plastic eyes burned her skin. She walked past another four doors before stopping at the one where she'd been assigned, peered into the scanner, tapped in the daily watchword, and then, when it hissed open, slipped through as though escaping pursuit.

"Welcome, 4107. Are you ready to complete your daily check-in?" The lab AI, Harriet, was all business.

"Go ahead," she murmured, shuffling over the white, freshly sanitized, engineered tiles to the most critical equipment in the lab—the coffee machine.

"In the last twenty-four hours, have you had contact with any individuals outside the company?"

"No," she murmured, twisting the valve to fill the machine's reservoir.

"Have you written or spoken about the nature of your work here?"

"No."

"On a scale of one to five, how would you rate your mental well-being?"

"Four."

"Would you like to elaborate on why you don't rate yourself a five?"

"I feel pressure from the scrutiny and from having to complete these damned daily check-ins."

"I see. How would you rate your physical well-being on a scale of one to five?"

"Three. Before you ask, my diet and exercise routine need work."

"Have you had any thoughts of self-harm?"

"No."

"On a scale of one to five, how would you rate your closeness to the subject under your care?"

She sighed, knowing the required answer but also knowing the sensors were measuring her truthfulness. "Three, I guess."

"While admirable in some fields, this level of empathy could become problematic in your current role. This is your third day rating yourself at a three or above. I'm scheduling an appointment at the wellness clinic for an Empathanyl injection. You will report for the injection during your lunch break. This is not optional."

"Yes, Mom," she sighed, sipping the hot, sweet, and faintly vanilla coffee drink. The truth was, she wanted the injection; her feelings were starting to impact her sleep. Cup in hand, she

walked over to the far end of the room, where a high-security door blocked access to the subject under her care. The door had a thick plasteel frame and a Diamatex central panel designed to allow light to pass through, but only in one direction. It showed a crystal-clear view into the room, while anyone on the other side would see a cloudy, opaque panel.

Peering through, Juliet quickly forgot about the stark white coloring of the facility, and a small smile crept over her lips. The walls of the room beyond were painted in murals. One depicted Jupiter and one of its moons as seen from space. Another showed a beach with white sand and brilliant blue water, and a third displayed a scene from a jungle—verdant leaves and yellow eyes peering from the dark shadows. She knew the wall where the door sat, the one she couldn't see, was painted with a brilliant rainbow in a cloud-filled sky. A soft blue couch, wide enough to double as a bed, sat in the middle of the room. Beyond that singular furnishing, in the rear half of the room, were stacks of ancient paperback books, and behind those was a partially walled-off alcove containing a toilet and sink.

However, Juliet didn't have eyes for the room and its out-of-place décor; her gaze settled on its only occupant. She stared at her for several long seconds, some kind of disconnect in her mind throwing her into confusion. Something was off, and it took a long moment of staring for it to click: She was Juliet. How was she looking at herself in there? How was she reclining on that blue couch, one foot up on the back, the other stretched out while she lay flat on her back? Her arms were upstretched, holding a book open as she read, a squint of amusement brightening her pale, lavender eyes. "If that's me . . ."

Juliet's eyes snapped. Her heart was racing, her breaths coming quick and ragged. She was in near-total darkness, just a few amber LEDs illuminating her quarters on the gunship. "Are you okay?" Angel asked, "Your lattice was active, but the temperatures were well within safe parameters."

"I . . ." Juliet licked her dry lips, gathering saliva to swallow. She tried again, "I just had a freaky dream." She knew Angel would ask for details, so she tried to gather the weird, disjointed images. "I was working in some kind of lab. I was in charge of a subject, but when I looked into her room, I found out the subject was me . . ." She trailed off, recognizing how trite it sounded; any year-one psychology student could make a dozen theories about what it meant. In all actuality, the dream was probably meaningless. "But the lattice . . ."

"You're wondering if it could be a true-dream?"

"I'd think it was nothing, just a bit of my daytime stress invading my sleep, if not for that. Why was the lattice active?"

"It's not uncommon for your lattice to heat up a bit while you're preparing to sleep and your inhibitions are down. You've often heard the thoughts of your friends and crewmates at those times. Just now, it was hotter than usual, but not as much as I've seen it in the past."

Juliet sighed, arching her back as she stretched. She didn't want to belabor the issue, but she knew something was different about this dream. Angel was right; sometimes, the lattice got active while she fell asleep, but this dream happened when she'd been deep asleep. More importantly, it just felt weird. Nonetheless, nothing could be done about it, and she didn't want Angel to start obsessing over it. She looked at the time and grunted, sitting on the edge of her bunk. "0712. Might as well get up. Gonna be a busy one. Oof." She rubbed her temples. That dream had interrupted the best part of her sleep.

“Frida’s working on your clearances, but it’s likely you won’t be able to depart until late afternoon.”

“Yeah, but I want to do a systems check on the *Lady*, and I’ve got some packing to do.” She walked over to her little bathroom, stripping off her T-shirt on the way and adding it to a laundry pile by the door. The shower felt great, stimulating her nerve endings, getting her brain moving, and pushing the weird, lingering, dream-induced cobwebs from her mind. She dressed in some black combat fatigues, a plain black T-shirt, and her combat boots, the ones that went with her flex-plate armor. She tucked her helmet and armor into a duffel with her needler, polyblast shotgun, lots of ammo, explosive charges, and two spider drones.

“Dora Lee and the others will be bringing gear, too,” Angel reminded her.

“Oh, I know.” Juliet slung her gun belt around her hips, balancing the Texan on one hip with her sword on the other. She’d take the belt off when piloting the *Lady*, but the weight of it had become soft of a security blanket, and she felt better as soon as the buckle snapped into place. She packed her duffel with a few extra pairs of jeans, a few different shirts for various types of weather, and, of course, her riding jacket.

“Underwear, Juliet!”

“Oh yeah! And socks,” she laughed. By the time she was done, the duffel was fairly stuffed and quite heavy. She slung it over one shoulder and made her way out of the gunship. “Any word from the *Kowashi*?” Before going to sleep, she’d sent a message to Aya and Alice about her impending trip down to the surface.

“Yes, you have a message from Aya. It’s voice only.”

“Play it,” Juliet said, securing the airlock.

Aya’s words came through her implants, clear but for a tiny recurring loop of static every few seconds—some kind of interference from the ship’s systems, no doubt. “Lucky, we got your message. Wish you could tell us where exactly you’re going. How can I rescue you if I don’t know where you are? Stay safe, okay? I hope you’re right, and it will only take you a few days. I hope you’re all done before we get back. *The Cherry Blossom* needs her pilot, and I need my partner! We’ve got some salvaging history to make, you know? Keep me updated, all right? Love you.”

As the hiss of static faded, Angel said, “That’s the end.”

“Damn,” Juliet laughed, squeezing her eyes tight. “How can such a simple message make me feel so much?”

“It means a lot to you—and me—to have people to care about.”

“And caring about me,” Juliet sighed, lugging the duffel to the hangar door. Angel didn’t respond, but the silence was comfortable as they both contemplated the value of loved ones. Not for the first time in recent history, Juliet’s mind drifted to thoughts of her mom and sister as she walked through the port corridors to the *Lady*’s berth. They were a big part of why she was eager to put the threat of WBD behind her. Surely, she could pay off her sister’s debts to Helios

Corp. and hire someone to navigate the legal morass required to get her out of prison. Once she'd done that and reconciled with her, wouldn't it be great to visit their mom together? It would be easier to deal with her mom's shortcomings, knowing she didn't have to rely on her for anything and could leave anytime she wanted.

She spent the morning reviewing the *Lady's* systems, pushing away haunting memories of when Nick had drilled those checklists into her mind. The ship was in great shape—of course, it should be; Nick had put a lot of money into her maintenance, and Juliet had treated her like a baby since buying her from Nick's nephew. The final check was to visually verify that the ammo cans were full and that the belts were properly seated in the autocannons. "Unless things go really, really wrong, we won't be needed to shoot anything while flying down to Earth," she laughed.

Angel was quick to concur. "If that happens, best to point yourself away from the planet and boost to top speed because the orbital defense systems will obliterate you."

"You think there's any chance I could escape?"

"Maybe. If you don't arm the guns and don't shoot, they may hold fire as long as you're not wanted with a kill order and you're burning away from the planet."

Juliet grunted, closing the second port ammunition canister. She knew flying around Earth was highly regulated. An interceptor firing its guns in the atmosphere or even orbit would be swarmed with a dozen different corporate mil-sec response drones and maybe some manned short-range defense fighters; she had no intention of testing those systems. "Check in with Frida, will you?"

Rather than the summarized update she'd expected, Angel opened a vid call window with Frida's smiling, if harried, face at the center. "Lucky, I'm making progress. How are things with your ship?"

"She's ready to go. I'm assuming the others are getting their ducks in a row?"

"Yep, they're en route. I gave 'em directions to your hangar. I think you'll be cleared for launch by fourteen hundred. Tanaka's coordinating with an asset on the ground. So far, he's kept everything under wraps other than the city; he says you need accommodations in Boulder, right?"

"Right. Um, how far is that from the New Denver Port?" Juliet could vaguely picture the Colorado Protectorate in her mind's eye, but other than knowing Denver and Boulder were near the Rockies, she didn't know squat about their locations.

"It's less than an hour. Well, it's probably a lot more than an hour, considering you have to pass through two separate checkpoints. There's still a lot of tension in that region from the conflict ten years ago. Serious anti-corp vibes, so, you know, just be yourself."

"War," Juliet said reflexively, remembering how angry Ghoul had been when Juliet had used the corporate media's line, referring to the war as a conflict.

"Hmm?"

“It was a full-blown war, not a conflict. It messed up a generation of people in that region.”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry. I really don’t know much about all that . . .”

“Nah, forget it. How could you? I wouldn’t say anything, but someone I admired was in that fight, and it did a number on her.” Juliet wanted to say they were on their way to contact that same friend, but Tanaka had drilled his compartmental operation practices too thoroughly. Nobody needed to know Juliet’s history with Ghoul. Nobody even needed to know she’d met her before.

“Okay. Well, my message still stands: Make sure people know you’re not corpo-sec. The team will all be wearing their own things, so you won’t look uniform. We’ve gotten credentials from the local contact providing cover. Officially, you’re working for a local businessman who’s had some agricultural shipments hijacked near the Boulder area. He’s got ranches in Nebraska, and the story is that some livestock heading west were taken. You’ll be acting as mercs new to the area, but definitely not corpo-friendly, and, as much as people there hate corps, they like food. That should buy you some goodwill.”

“Damn, you’ve been busy, huh?”

Frida sighed and nodded, rubbing her eyes. “Oh, let’s just say I’m going to sleep like a baby as soon as you liftoff.”

Juliet nodded, but she knew better; Frida probably wouldn’t get much sleep until Leo was home from the hospital. “Any word on Leo?”

“Mostly good news—his heart’s recovering, but he’ll probably need new kidneys.”

“Well,” Juliet forced a smile, pressing her lips together, “Could be worse, right? They change out a million kidneys a year, I bet.”

Frida nodded, sniffing. “Yeah. ‘Course. The old man had a lot more than that replaced back when . . .” She trailed off, and Juliet snorted.

“It’s okay, Frida. We’ve buried the hatchet.” She sighed, stretched, and added, “I’m gonna grab a bite before the others get here. Good work on everything. Do me a favor, yeah?”

“Of course! What?”

“Give Leo a punch and a hug from me. In that order.”

“Promise,” Frida laughed. “Speak soon!” She waved and cut the connection.

Juliet made good on her promise, slipping out of the hangar and wandering into port to grab lunch at one of the nearby restaurants. She was just polishing off some corn chips and hummus when Angel pulled up a vid of the hangar entrance, displaying Dora Lee’s perpetually stoic face as she peered into the security cam. “Tell her I’m on my way,” she said, wiping her mouth and throwing back the rest of her iced tea.

Five minutes later, she hurried down the hallway, waving as soon as Dora came into view, “Yo! Sorry, I didn’t expect you for another thirty minutes or so.”

“No worries,” she said in her sharp, clipped voice, gesturing to her hard-shelled rolling case. “Just wanted to get all my gear loaded before those boys get in my way.” She peered over Juliet’s shoulder. “They should be here soon, though.”

“Right, come on,” Juliet keyed open the hangar door and led the way. Inside, she paused and gestured to the sleek, angular, black-and-gray shape of the *Lady Hawk*. “Here she is. Best dang girl to ever grace Jupiter’s upper atmosphere.”

“Yeah?” Dora raised an eyebrow, appraising the light fighter. “She sure ain’t no shuttle, is she? Don’t think I’ve ever been in a ship like that. Fast, huh?”

Juliet nodded, gently caressing the ship’s fuselage. “Oh yeah. Don’t worry, though. I’ll keep things smooth on the way down. Don’t wanna get melted by the orbital platforms for coming in too hot.” She reached for Dora’s case, but the smaller woman tightened her grip.

“I got it.” She winced at herself and shrugged, “Sorry, lots of precious tech in here.”

Juliet laughed. “I get it.” She showed Dora the *Lady’s* tiny cargo hold. It was more of a wide hallway with straps on the walls, really. She’d already tied down her duffel, and Dora took the other side.

“Them boys can work around our stuff, huh?” Juliet had gotten to know everyone on the team quite a bit over the last few months, but she particularly liked Dora Lee. She was tough and didn’t talk much, but she was always quick to share a raised eyebrow with Juliet when someone—usually Leo or Barns—did something stupid.

“Speak of the devil,” Angel said into Juliet’s ear, “They’re at the door.”

“They’re here,” Juliet said. “Go ahead and claim the copilot’s seat if you want. We’ll make the boys use the acceleration couches in the bunks.”

“Right on!” Dora flashed her a thumbs-up, then clambered up the central access shaft. Juliet jogged to the hangar door and opened it. Where Dora had been wearing her net-diving one-piece under a pair of loose, blue overalls, Barns and Hawkins both looked like veteran soldiers about to get dumped into a jungle conflict. They wore green fatigues and armored vests and had heavily laden backpacks slung over their shoulders. Barns carried a massive belt-fed machine gun attached to a strut that protruded from a plasteel harness, and Hawkins had at least four smaller-caliber rifles and pistols stowed all over his person.

Juliet took them in as they grunted their greetings. She reached out to rap her knuckles against Barns’s gun harness. It sat over his armored vest, adding another layer of bulk. “Quite a piece of hardware.”

He shrugged, “Boss said to be ready for anything.”

“All right, c’mon,” Juliet motioned them in and jerked her thumb toward the ship. “Meet *Lady Hawk*.”

“Jeezus!” Barns said the word with a distinct “z” sound and whistled. “That bird’s a killer, eh?”

Juliet smiled at him, cocking an eyebrow. "You know something about ships, Barns? Why'd you wait until now to show me a sign of intelligent life?"

"Very funny. I've been in a few combat scenarios involving drop ships, and we had escorts like this. Well, not like this," he chuckled. "Let's just say they wished they looked like this. I got to know some of the pilots, and they'd talk. You know I'm a gearhead. I learned a thing or two."

"Sorry to interrupt," Hawkins said, stepping past Barns. "Where can I tie this stuff down?"

Juliet laughed, pointing toward the back of the ship. "Just past the airlock. She doesn't have much cargo space, but it'll do." She clapped Barns on the back, slapping the plasteel gun harness. "C'mon, you can see the inside. We'll get your stuff all tied down, and then I'll show you your acceleration couches. We're blowing this moon in less than an hour."