

Zone 16, Earth

They had always been good together, but last night had been something special, Juni knew. She'd felt it. She could still feel it in the tingling and aching. In the smile she'd woken up wearing. Something had changed.

She should have known that meant trouble. When did anything good come without a shadow?

The gunshot carried across the flat plains, echoing off the mountain and through the canyons.

Juni's first mistake when it jarred her from the warm caress of her dozing was to reach for a knife. Those were sitting on the Phoenix, useless. Her second was to almost trip on the bed sheet Archer must have put over her at some point. Her third was the time it took to force memory through the whiskey fog.

They'd worn themselves and each other out barely four hours earlier and fallen asleep on the floor by the bed. She'd never slept so deeply, so satisfied and content. Feeling so safe. Stupid. In fact, she'd used Archer as a mattress and pillow; now he was gone, and she hadn't even noticed. How much had she drunk?

It didn't matter now.

While she pulled on a vest, jeans, and boots, her mind ran through everything she'd seen. There was a knife. Behind the bar, for cutting fruit. Nothing else. Certainly no guns. She grabbed her comms unit and sprinted to the bar. Archer didn't answer. Neither did the Wraith.

She ran to the stables, noting the hoofprints in the mud, heading towards the trees. That was the direction of the shot. Archer's horse was gone, and hers was already saddled up. He'd probably wanted them to get in one last ride before the transport arrived. Why hadn't he waited, then?

The horse was spooked by the sound and nervous at her fast approach, but it knew from the previous day she could be trusted. She climbed up and they burst out of the stable and jumped the fence.

Why had there been only one shot? Her mind replayed the sound, but she'd been too close to sleep and wasn't sure she was recalling it right. She thought it was a handgun. No sniper, which was why she'd risked moving so fast at the ranch. But who was shooting and at what? No, just the who. There was no chance of coincidence – Archer had either done the shooting or been shot at. And, out here, would someone have got close enough for him to take the gun from them? Juni wasn't sure he had

the power to curve a bullet right now, with psionics tearing apart his brain.

She urged the horse into a harder gallop. Her eyes scoured every inch of the woodland ahead. Whoever was out there knew she was around. She was doing exactly what they would expect, but there was little choice. She could only do what they expected and be better than they knew.

The ground became firmer again as they entered the treeline. Juni was forced to slow by the density of the trees. Unexpected colour began to lace among the trunks. Flowers. The hoof prints were straight, like he knew exactly where he was going.

Her horse saw it at the same time as her. Hidden until now by a tree ahead, a dark shape lay in the dirt and patchy grass.

Juni pulled her feet out of the stirrups and jumped into a crouch in the saddle. As they reached the tree, she leapt off to the right and the horse continued past on the left. She rolled, knife ready. There was no one hiding behind or up the tree, and no one appeared as her horse continued for several metres before beginning a slow arc back around.

Deliberately springing traps set for her wasn't her favourite thing, but she was no stranger to it. If she was going to be ambushed, waiting wouldn't prevent it. But they could

probably have killed her in her sleep, judging by how even Archer rolling her over hadn't woken her, so this was likely about him and not her. They could be halfway to orbit by now, their job done.

She strode to Archer's still horse, lying in a pool of blood and scattered flowers.

No one was watching her. Except her horse, pawing at the ground and making anxious sounds. She examined the dirt. Six sets of boot prints converged on the horse, fast. There were scrapes and gouges, knee imprints, a couple of hand prints, little splatters of blood from a nose or mouth. They hadn't taken him easily. But they had taken him. A seventh set of prints approached more evenly, shallower, slower. Whoever that was had been what it took to finally overpower him. Five sets of prints headed away again, accompanied by several drag marks. Archer and two of their own, dead or unconscious.

The bloody flowers were freshly picked. There was a data shard printed from a datapad, half-buried in the dirt, trampled by boots. It showed a simple map with a note. 'Specially cultivated for visitors. Please only pick these. -S.' He'd been out here doing that 'romantic' thing she simultaneously didn't understand and kind of liked.

A rushing, sizzling sound preceded a pill-

shaped grey craft arcing down and over the top of the canopy. It wasn't Sandra's transport. Juni clucked her tongue and her horse hesitantly cantered over. She jumped back into the saddle and they bolted in the direction the ship had gone.

As the horse galloped from between the last two trees, she should have noticed the cobweb. The feather against her third eye. But her focus was on Archer. Someone had him and she would get him back. She'd kill them all and take back what was hers. Questions later.

The ship sat at a right angle to her approach, a loading bay door open on either side so she could see straight through. Four men, all gesturing urgently and angrily into the back, none of them looking her way. One suddenly reached for his sidearm, and then he crumpled backwards out of the ship into a splatter of his own blood. Archer was awake.

Juni urged the horse on faster, again taking her feet out of the stirrups and readying the knife.

The next movement was not another falling attacker. It was Archer, collapsing onto the floor in front of the far door. He didn't move.

And then she was on them. The horse turned sharply to avoid hitting the ship, and Juni leapt. The men heard the thundering hooves too late. The knife went into the first

throat. Back out and across the ship into another. Her fist flew at a third throat, but it didn't connect. She was pulled sharply backwards and hit the cockpit dividing wall.

She landed on her feet and looked up in time to see a dirty white boot kick Archer's unconscious body out of the door.

One of the men lunged at her to bring her under control. He dropped into a heap half a second later, and she pounced for the man in the tattered white cloak. But it didn't matter that his back was to her. You couldn't take a Necurian by surprise. She stopped in mid-air, suspended by an invisible grip around her entire body. And then she flew backwards again. Much harder this time.

She hit the wall as the door closed on Archer's still, bloody form. And her world vanished.

Transport Vessel, Earth

Sandra crunched three mints and braced herself for more social interaction. She stared out of the side window at the little green dots and sweeping yellow-tan expanse beyond. At least she got to look at that again first. Not that it compared to the rainforest and beach and bioluminescent light show they were in for tonight. Playing shepherd to tourists was a tiny price to pay for being a part of the project and getting to descend to Earth now and then.

She glanced at her datapad to remind herself of their names. She suspected they were not actually newlyweds. The raised eyebrow on the Krathan when she first mentioned it was a bit of a giveaway. But she saw the way he'd looked at her, and the way she'd actively tried to seem casual about choosing the kind of hat that seemed to mean something to him, and the way she...subtly threatened Sandra when she'd suggested they should have a guide with them.

The transport thumped gently, startling her.

The AI displayed the weather and temperature above the door before it opened. The air smelled fresh after the storm. She heard nothing as she stepped outside. She

would have thought the couple might still be asleep, but there was no sound from the stables, either. The horses usually recognised the sound of the transport and whinnied a greeting. They must be getting in one last ride.

She headed for the communal building. The robot was picking up empty bottles from the courtyard. Sandra sighed. Was that a dress discarded in the mud? She sighed again. With a little more caution, she stepped through the door and was relieved to find no naked people. At least they'd left this place tidy.

'Oh my,' she heard the robot say.

A horse whinnied.

Sandra stepped back outside, wearing her biggest smile. It immediately dropped.

'Oh my God! Call a medical team,' she told the robot.

She dropped her datapad and ran across the courtyard towards the single horse and rider. If he could be called that. He was barely in the saddle and didn't look conscious. His sandy-blond hair was matted with blood. His shirt was torn.

Sandra barely got there in time to stop his head from hitting the ground as he slid off the horse.

'Juni,' he mumbled.

'Where is she? What happened?'

Archer reached up and grasped the stirrup.

The horse took a few steps sideways, pulling him to his feet.

‘Juni,’ he said again, louder, like he was trying to call for her.

‘I don’t think she’s here. The other horse is gone. Did you fall?’

If they were anywhere else, she might have said he’d been attacked. His nose was clearly broken, his lips were both split, and his cheek was cut open. Was that why he kept saying her name? He wasn’t calling for her, but saying she’d done this? No, Sandra had seen those stolen glances. Something was very—

‘Juni!’ Archer lurched forwards into something approaching a run.

The robot glided back from the transport with a medkit, but Archer shoved it aside and rushed into one of the sleeping quarters. He came back out a few seconds later. The robot slipped silently up behind him and injected him with something. Archer cried out and spun and punched the machine with a metallic thud through the doorway. Then he grasped his hand and fell into the mud again with a curse, dizziness and probably a concussion exacerbated by whatever was in that shot.

He was on his feet before Sandra could get close. With an angry grunt, he pushed an imaginary person aside and rushed to the communal building. Sandra hurried after him,

catching a glint of metal in the sky.

‘Where is she?’ Archer shouted and immediately gripped his head like it might burst.

‘I don’t know,’ Sandra told him, although she wasn’t sure he was even aware of her, much less addressing her. ‘We’ll scan the surface—’

The hum of the medical transport reached their ears and Archer’s head snapped up. His... No, that couldn’t be right... His eyes were glowing blue! They dulled and flickered and his eyelids pulled shut despite his obvious efforts. The shot must have been a sedative. Bionic eyes, she decided. They must be.

Archer dropped to one knee. He groaned through gritted teeth, fighting the sedative. His hands balled into fists. He opened his eyes again and there was the glow.

‘It’s just our medical team, Mr Archer,’ Sandra said.

Something cracked loudly. The window. No, the window and a floorboard under him.

‘Juni!’

‘She’s not—’

A roar that sounded as much pain as anger erupted from Archer. Sandra couldn’t help but scream as every bottle behind the bar exploded, the windows blasted outwards, and wooden beams and planks cracked everywhere.

And then he wasn't there.

Sandra's brain would have no more hope in the following days of understanding what her eyes had witnessed than she did in that moment. In an instant, she was thrown backwards through the air, away from a gaping hole in the wall and a deafening sonic boom, and Archer was standing outside. Then she landed in an armchair.

She bounced a few times and when her eyes steadied, framed by the ragged hole through the dust and falling splinters, Archer collapsed.