

JUNO STEEL AND THE TIME GONE BY (PART ONE)

Scene: 1

SOUND: A SANDSTORM, AND FOOTSTEPS IN THE SAND. THEN AN ELECTRONIC BEEP.

THEIA:

Caution: radiation detected at. Fatal levels. Turn back.
Turn back.

SOUND: JUNO KEEPS WALKING. AFTER A MOMENT, THE THEIA BEEPS AGAIN.

User safety tip: this is. A very bad idea. Suggestion:
activate Theia Global Map. To search for shelter.

SOUND: JUNO KEEPS WALKING.

Caution: I cannot act without user permissions. User
permissions are needed. Awaiting user permissions.

JUNO:

(GRUNTS, AND PUNCHES HIS OWN EYE)

SOUND: PUNCH.

THEIA:

You appear to be punching your own face. Would you like
some help with that?

JUNO:

Just... shut... up...
(A FAINTING NOISE)

SOUND: HE HITS THE SAND AND FALLS ONTO HIS STOMACH.

THEIA:

For your safety. I do not recommend you lie down. In this
location.

JUNO:

(MUFFLED GRUNT)

THEIA:

Reporting potential threats active as of last user scan:
threat one: a massive sandstorm. Threat two: fatal

radiation. Threat three: this area of the desert is recognized by the Martian Wildlife Foundation as a protected breeding ground for. Peepers.

JUNO:

I said shut up!

SOUND: SANDSTORM. THEN A CHIRPING NOISE FAR AWAY. A RUSTLE OF SAND. WHEN IT STARTS AGAIN IT'S CLOSER - AND MORE THAN ONE THING IS PEEPING.

THEIA:

Playing previously-downloaded information on Peepers.

JUNO:

(GROAN)

THEIA:

Native only to the northern deserts of Mars, Peepers went uncaptured and unresearched for several centuries after their discovery.

SOUND: THE PEEPING GROWS CLOSER. MORE AND MORE OF IT EACH TIME.

Aboveground, Peepers resemble colonies of small, tunneling creatures which pop into and out of the ground and make a noise not unlike Earth's groundhogs or meerkats.

SOUND: THE PEEPING GROWS CLOSER. MORE AND MORE OF IT EACH TIME.

Researchers assumed these creatures to be individual organisms until three hundred years ago, when the first Peeper was successfully brought into captivity...

SOUND: MAXIMUM PEEPING, DIRECTLY SURROUNDING JUNO.

... and those small rodent-like structures were discovered to be the sensory organs of a much larger subterranean predator.

SOUND: SOMETHING HUGE BURSTS OUT OF THE SAND AND ROARS.

JUNO:

(MUTTERING, ON DEATH'S DOOR)
Took you long enough.

SOUND: ROARING AND PEEPING. A LASER EXPLOSION. THE PEEPER

SQUEALS AND ITS PEEPING RETREATS. SOMEONE WALKS UP TO JUNO, RELOADING A GUN.

JACKET:

Hey.

(PAUSE)

Hey, you.

JUNO:

Go away. I'm busy.

JACKET:

Hmph.

SOUND: JACKET CROUCHES DOWN INTO THE SAND AND PICKS JUNO UP.

JUNO:

H-hey, what the hell are you doing? Put me down, you...

(HE SEES JACKET'S FACE. THEN, DIZZILY)

The hell? I... I know you.

JACKET:

A correction: I know you. I have been told it is important to speak accurately, when beginning a business transaction.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Brown jacket. Tough skin. Broad shoulders. Dark, hard eyes that looked like they'd draw blood if you got too close.

This guy had been stalking me since what felt like a lifetime ago, back in Hyperion - and if I'd been scared of him then, seeing him up close only made it clearer how easily those big, scarred hands could snap my neck.

My name's Juno Steel. And I'm... just a guy who wanders into near-certain death in the desert and then gives the glad eye to his probable killer.

(PAUSE)

Y'know, saying that out loud, a lot of criticisms I've taken over the years suddenly make a lot more sense?

JACKET:

My hovercycle's radiation shield is only active when the engine is running. Which means I'm going to go now, and you're going to come with me.

JUNO:

You were watching me... before the museum, and before the

subway, you were watching...

(AFTER A PAUSE)

No. No, look, I'm done. You want to spy on me? Fine. But I don't care. I'm doing this on my own.

JACKET:

Dying?

JUNO:

That's not necessarily the plan, but if that's the last move I can make solo, then sure, that.

JACKET:

He'll find you, you know.

JUNO:

(SCARED)

What?

JACKET:

The one who gave you that eye. Have you activated it recently?

JUNO:

Not for a few hours, but—

JACKET:

Then he has your location. He will find you - and whatever's left of your mind, once the radiation's done with it.

(PAUSE)

Unless you come with me.

JUNO:

Yeah? Why should I?

JACKET:

I know how to remove that cyber-eye from your head. I know how to set you free.

(PAUSE)

You can get in the sidecar when you're ready.

SOUND: HE STARTS WALKING.

JUNO:

(FRUSTRATED GRUNT)

SOUND: JUNO FOLLOWS.

JACKET:

Good. Be sure to strap in.

JUNO:

Not until you tell me where we're going.

SOUND: THERE IS A PAUSE, WHILE JACKET PUTS ON HIS HELMET AND RIFLES THROUGH HIS BAG.

Of course. Another man of mystery. Listen, I've really had enough of these, so if you can't even tell me where we're going I'll—

(OOF, AS JACKET THRUSTS A HELMET INTO HIS STOMACH)

JACKET:

I'll tell you. I was just looking for a helmet in your size.

JUNO:

What the... How many helmets do you keep in that bag?

JACKET:

Bike safety is important.

SOUND: SNAP OF THE HELMET STRAP.

We're going to see someone about a job. She has what we need, but Buddy doesn't do anything for free.

JUNO:

Very specific, thanks.

SOUND: SNAP OF THE HELMET STRAP.

Where?

JACKET:

Where all of the most important jobs on Mars happen. The Cerberus Province.

SOUND: THE BIKE STARTS UP. A SHIELD PROJECTS AROUND IT, AND JACKET STARTS DRIVING.

MUSIC: JUNO'S THEME.

Scene: 2

(THE CERBERUS PROVINCE SPACEPORT; THEN BUDDY'S BAR,
THE LIGHTHOUSE.)

JUNO (NARRATOR):

To be honest, I still wasn't convinced my mind hadn't
gotten roasted. They say after one hour uncovered from the
radioactive sun you start hallucinating, and after five
it's time to say bye-bye to a good chunk of your brain. I'd
been out there... well, somewhere between those two options.
My watch said it had only been ninety minutes, but on the
other hand I wasn't wearing a watch.

JACKET:

So. Do you have a good reason for walking out in the
desert? Besides your death-wish.

JUNO:

Besides my what?

JACKET:

It's well-documented.

JUNO:

Documented *where*? How long have you been watching me? Is
that how you found me out here?

(PAUSE. NO ANSWER)

Hello?

JACKET:

Hello.

JUNO:

How long have you been—

JACKET:

We are almost at the Cerberus Province. Buddy will answer
your questions when you speak with her. If this job is not
to your liking, well... back into the desert with you, and
you die a free man.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

So it was out of the frying pan, into the biggest hideout
of thieves and murderers and outlaws in the solar system, I
guess.

(SIGH)

We saw the volcanoes first. A ring of them, dusty and dormant. And then, at the center of that ring...

SOUND: WHISTLING WIND.

JACKET:
The Lighthouse.

JUNO:
(BREATHING HEAVILY)
What?

JACKET:
The Lighthouse activates at night, to guide ships to the spaceport beneath it. I hear before it was installed more ships landed inside volcanoes than was acceptable.

JUNO:
So, like... one ship?

THEIA:
Would you like to research the number of ships—

JUNO:
Shut up.

JACKET:
I will not. Are you done throwing up, now? It cannot be helping your radiation sickness to stay out here.

JUNO:
I think—

JACKET:
And if you vomit on my hovercycle I cannot be held responsible for what happens to you next.

JUNO:
(SPITS. THEN,)
I think I'm good.

JACKET:
Get on, then.

SOUND: HOVERCYCLE STARTS UP AGAIN.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The Lighthouse was *huge*, an intricate crossing of plates and pipes that looked like someone had spun a spiderweb from gold, then grabbed its center and pulled it up to scratch the clouds. It was even beautiful, for a minute. Then I wondered if you could see the Piranha's body from up there, and then it just made me sick.

The Lighthouse wasn't what I expected from the myths about some ramshackle pirate hideout hidden underneath the desert. According to the stories, the Cerberus Province was more meeting place than city - a non-stop crime convention to trade business cards and thermonuclear weaponry. It didn't have a Dome, after all. Living there long-term would've been suicide.

But the Lighthouse didn't line up with the stories. Neither did the Cerberus Province itself, once we slipped underground to see it.

JUNO:

(TO JACKET, SURPRISED)
What the hell are all those?

JACKET:

Do you mean the buildings or the tents?

JUNO:

I don't know. Both?

JACKET:

Well. Some are buildings, and some are tents.

JUNO:

I know that! I mean... Look, that lady's drying sheets on a balcony. That's a grocery stand in a brick house. And that guy's taking his clothes out of that laundromat!

JACKET:

It is very dusty on Mars.

JUNO:

Why do they live down here? Nobody lives down here. Nobody.

JACKET:

Not by choice. When we land it is imperative that you stay close to me and not look too long at anyone else's property.

JUNO (NARRATOR) :

When he was done parking we walked out into the street. The buildings and tents I'd seen from above were thick, here, people packed elbow to elbow, vendors shouting into the street.

VENDORS:

Peepers! Getcha pickled peepers over here!

(ALIEN ACCENT)

Plutonian candy! Delicious Plutonian candy, Plutonium extra!

(ALIEN LANGUAGE, BURIED IN THE OTHERS. "PAMEEBA" MEANS "SALE.")

Vii, pameeba sib boo! Pameeba, pameeba, pameeba!

Lead hoods, got some lead hoods here, good for what ails ya, stick it on your head and ooh, feel that radiation drift away! Feel forty years younger, ma'am, I guarantee it—

SOUND: SOMEONE GRABS JUNO'S COAT.

JUNO (NARRATOR) :

You get so lost in a place like that you forget you're a part of it... until it reaches out and grabs you.

OUTER RIM REFUGEE 1:

Please.

JUNO:

(YELP)

OUTER RIM REFUGEE 1:

(HEAVILY ACCENTED W/ ALIEN LANGUAGE)

Please, you will help me. You will help me. The teecket they give me, the teecket, it is false!

JUNO:

Ticket? I don't—

OUTER RIM REFUGEE 1:

I have moneys. On Susano-o I am doctor, do you know this place? Bank account, years interest thirty, I have... I have...
(CRUSHED)

Please, please... *Tammono*, you will help me, you will help me...

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(HORRIFIED)

The woman was wearing a mask, but I'd knocked it crooked in my surprise... and underneath...

Her skin... it looked so painful. Big plates of cracking-charcoal crust on a plane of soft, raw red and gray. She looked burned... or melting... or both. Long-term radiation damage. The kind of stuff they showed in old Academy videos and promised we'd never actually see, that you'd have to be crazy to stay outside a dome long enough to get it.

All of a sudden I noticed that there were people all over the street wearing masks like that, people by the dozens that must've been covered in those burns, and if that many people needed those masks... maybe crazy wasn't the problem.

Then Brown-Jacket grabbed me by the shoulder and kept me moving.

SOUND: JACKET GRABS JUNO BY THE BACK OF THE NECK AND KEEPS MOVING.

JACKET:

Juno. We have to leave now.

OUTER RIM REFUGEE 1:

Moneys I have, sir, please, your vehicle, your vehicle!

JUNO:

Wh-what...

JACKET:

(QUIET)

I told you not to look too long at anyone else's property.

JUNO:

Property?

JACKET:

That bulge beneath that woman's sleeve? A Blood Filtration Bracelet - what some call a Debtor's Tag. She is serving an indentured servitude to pay for her healthcare. If you

attempt to do as she says, her treatment will end, and she will die.

JUNO:

But... you're just gonna let that—

JACKET:

I have no choice. That woman is finished. She took an illegal ride to the Solar planets, became ill, and sold herself to live a few years longer. It is a common mistake.

JUNO:

But her skin... how long has he been paying?

JACKET:

I have seen similar surface-level symptoms manifest within two years.

JUNO:

Surface-level. Yeah, sure. That sounds great.

JACKET:

Not five hours ago getting too involved in a city's politics nearly killed you. Do you really want to make the same mistake so soon?

JUNO:

(AFTER AN AWKWARD PAUSE)
I... No. No, I... guess not.

JACKET:

Good. Now please. Get in this dumpster.

JUNO:

What?

JACKET:

I'm afraid I must insist.

JUNO:

H-hey, put me down—

SOUND: JACKET DROPS HIM IN THE DUMPSTER WITH A CLANG.

Oof!

(PAINED NOISES)

The hell was that for?

JACKET:

Have you used any of your eye's special functions since we entered the Cerberus Province?

JUNO:

What? I haven't—

JACKET:

In the interest of fairness I should tell you that if you have, I will be forced to crush your head with this dumpster lid.

JUNO:

How is that any fairer—

(PANICKED)

Whoa, whoa, there! No, I haven't used it. You said that's how Ramses is gonna track me, right?

JACKET:

That is good. And yet we are being followed.

JUNO:

What?

JACKET:

Quiet. Listen.

(BEAT)

There is a figure behind me, slight, wearing a black hood. Do you see their face?

JUNO:

(WHISPERED)

No, it's... covered by a scarf. They could've just come in from outside. They've got sand all over—

JACKET:

Their clothes have sand - but not their boots. It's a disguise. We may have to relocate our meeting.

(PAUSE, TO THINK)

I am going to step into this shop and buy a large decaffeinated Jovian tea with two sugars. You will stay here and watch to see what they do.

JUNO:

Is the tea some kind of code? What does it mean?

JACKET:

It means I am thirsty. It is large because I am very thirsty, and decaffeinated because I have a predisposition to addictive—

JUNO:

Okay, yeah, I get it. Just go get your stupid tea, I'll watch the road.

JACKET:

Thank you.

SOUND: JACKET WALKS IN. THE DOOR JINGLES.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Had to hand it to Brown-Jacket: he was right. As soon as we stopped moving our hooded tagalong stopped, too. She sat at a roadside stand and looked over the menu, flipping pages too quickly to read them. I knew a tail when I saw one.

Jacket came back out a minute later sucking down something that smelled like gasoline with two sugars.

JACKET:

The deed is done.

JUNO:

What deed?

SOUND: A SMALL EXPLOSION.

Whoa!

SOUND: INSIDE THE SHOP, PLATES BREAK AND TABLES FALL OVER.

COFFEE SHOP PATRONS:

The hell?

(AN EXTRAPLANETARY LANGUAGE)

Sintoloo ga voo?!

(YELP)

PATRON 1:

(ALIEN LANGUAGE)

Baweebis! Baweebis!

COFFEE SHOP OWNER:

What the hell are they trying to say?

PATRON 2:

They're saying "hood!" "Hood!" I think they saw whoever
planted the damn bomb!

PATRON 1:

(ALIEN LANGUAGE)

Gawoosh! Baweebis, baweebis!

COFFEE SHOP OWNER:

Is that them? Is that the low-life that blew up my store?

PATRON 1:

(ALIEN LANGUAGE, IN PAIN, BASICALLY CRYING)

Baweeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeebis!

COFFEE SHOP OWNER:

Outer Rim bum! Learn to talk right!

SOUND: THE HOODED WOMAN RUNS AWAY.

Hey, she's getting away! Get her, get her!

JUNO:

(A MOMENT, AS THE DIN BEGINS TO DIE BEHIND THEM)

... Wow.

(BEAT)

Did you pay them to say that?

JACKET:

No, I paid the other customer to translate anything they
said as "hood."

JUNO:

But if this place has so many people from the Outer Rim--

JACKET:

There are too many languages spoken on the Outer Rim to
keep up with. We have large communities from Balder. Yama.

JUNO:

Susano-o.

JACKET:

Indeed. And besides: they lost. Now take these.

SOUND: JACKET HANDS OVER KEYS.

JUNO:

Keys?

JACKET:

When the commotion settles you will remove yourself from the garbage, go down this alley, and take your second left. You will look for the analog lock that matches this key, and you will wait for me there - at the Lighthouse.

JUNO:

The Lighthouse? Really? You have the keys to that big tower—

SOUND: JACKET STARTS WALKING AWAY.

Hey! Hey, where the hell are you going?

JACKET:

To ensure the area is secure. Now be silent. Dumpsters cannot speak in the Cerberus Province.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I did what the big guy told me to. Waited a few minutes for the dust to settle, and when I was pretty sure nobody was watching me I went down the alley.

The Lighthouse was on the edge of town, and the closer I got the more radiation-ravaged the place looked. But there were no warning signs, no public health notices. Just an advertisement:

AD:

Feeling itchy? Hearing things? Gamma rays got you down? Visit the Cerberus Board of Fresh Starts for your Blood Filtration Bracelet today! No down payment required!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

(HE SHUDDERS)

The, uh, Lighthouse came soon after.

SOUND: KEYS Jangling. THE DOOR CREAKS OPEN. JUNO'S FOOTSTEPS ECHO WHEN HE ENTERS.

The inside was a bar: dark wood, plush cushions. Even the

dust looked nice, which was good, because there was a hell of a lot of it. I helped myself to an unmarked, extremely potent-looking bottle behind the bar and took a seat to examine it more closely with my eyes, mouth, and liver.

SOUND: JUNO SITS AND POURS A DRINK.

JUNO:

Here's lookin' at you, Lighthouse. Seems like both of us are back from the grave.

SOUND: HE STARTS DRINKING. CLINKING ICE CUBES.

BUDDY:

(QUICKLY)

If you keep stealing my wares, darling, I'll return you to that grave myself.

JUNO:

(CHOKES ON HIS DRINK DURING THAT LINE)

BUDDY:

That's about ten thousand creds of fine liquor you just spilled. A life like yours, I'd think you'd be a little more careful about putting yourself into debt with a stranger.

JUNO:

(CHOKING)

Who the hell are you?

BUDDY:

The person you're here to meet.

SOUND: BUDDY SITS.

Now go get yourself a drink. I'll be taking this one.

JUNO:

Hey, that was mine—

BUDDY:

And now it isn't. It's nothing personal, darling; I just have a natural tendency towards envy and I've always believed in doing what feels natural. Like now, for example, it feels natural for me to say I'll pay you the ten thousand creds you owe me if you shut up and get

yourself a drink.

SOUND: SHE DRINKS, CONTENTEDLY.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The woman who'd just taken my drink was a bombshell, by which I mean she looked extremely dangerous and made a hell of an entrance. She had big plumes of flame-red hair trailing over her neck and half her face and a dress so avant-garde I would've believed her if she said she got it next year. The first thing she did when she sat down was put a blaster down on the table in front of her and, in the process, reveal she had another one, two knives, and what looked like a grenade strapped to her leg.

She looked ready for a war. Hell, she looked ready to fight on both sides.

SOUND: JUNO WALKS TO GET THE GLASS.

JUNO:

So you're the big guy's buddy?

BUDDY:

That's what he's calling me? His buddy?

JUNO:

I'm sure he'll be disappointed to hear you disagree.

SOUND: GLASSES CLINKING. JUNO STARTS WALKING BACK.

BUDDY:

I don't, it's just funny of him. Fine, you can call me the same. Buddy.

JUNO:

Seems a little early for that.

BUDDY:

I'm friendly.

JUNO:

And him?

BUDDY:

He's not interested.

JUNO:

No, I mean, what's his--

BUDDY:

Besides, we aren't here to talk about him. We're here to talk about you, Juno Steel, ex-cop, ex-patsy for Ramses O'Flaherty, currently extremely unemployed and not taking it very well. You've got an eye problem, and I don't mean like glaucoma. You've just spent a few months being someone else's stooge - or thirty-eight years, depending on how you count it - and you're just about ready to stooge stag. That's where we come in.

(BEAT)

What's the matter? Did I get any of that wrong?

JUNO:

No. That's what's the matter.

BUDDY:

Oh, I'm sorry. Why don't you pour us both a drink and I'll try not to upset you so much, darling? What's the danger in just sitting and listening?

JUNO:

No, you know what? I'm tired of listening. It's someone else's turn to listen. Got it? The second it looks like you're trying to get me to do something I don't like, I'm walking out into the desert with a beach towel and no sunscreen. The *second*. Cuz I am not trading one smooth psychopath for another, you got me, I am not--

BUDDY:

I hear you. I'm stubborn, not deaf. Sit.

JUNO:

(GRUNT)

SOUND: HE SITS AND POURS BOTH OF THEM DRINKS.

BUDDY:

There. Doesn't this feel so much more civilized?

JUNO:

Gotta say, "buddy," I kinda walked into the desert to get away from "civilized."

BUDDY:

I know. And that was a very big move. Made me act faster than I planned to, but... you got lucky, and a position opened up a little earlier than expected.

JUNO:

Position? That why you've been watching me?

BUDDY:

Gainful employment. A lot to gain, too.

JUNO:

I'm not walking into any more bad contracts or big debts.

BUDDY:

And you don't have to. Like I said, I always keep my business partners happy, Juno - and unlike your two-bit former employer over at the Vixen Valley, I know that doesn't come by force. Father always said there are only two ways to keep the chickens in the coop: either build a big wall or make them never want to leave.

JUNO:

Didn't think there were many farmers on Mars.

BUDDY:

He was a prison warden, actually. Incredibly popular among his inmates. A bit less popular with Dark Matters.

JUNO:

Rest in peace.

BUDDY:

Yes, I would assume the rest of him is in one piece, but we never found it. Regardless, Juno, my point: scouting the talent I want is something I take very seriously, and you are only one name on a very, very long list. If you do not want this job, don't waste my time. The only reason you're here now is because I need three people, my third missed his flight to Mars, and you happened to be available.

JUNO:

Wow, you sure do know how to make a lady feel special.

BUDDY:

I know how to make a special lady feel special. Maybe if you're very good that'll be you.

Now, a toast. To a new and brighter future - no, no. I'm guessing we've both had entirely enough of that. To... letting go. Moving on.

JUNO:

Sure. To moving on.

SOUND: CLINK, AND THEY DRINK. THEY BOTH PAUSE.

BUDDY:

(A MEDITATIVE, "HM")

Now. The job.

Scene: 3

(A MONTAGE THROUGH THE NEXT FEW HOURS OF CONVERSATION, ALL OF WHICH TAKES PLACE IN THE LIGHTHOUSE; THEN, THE JOB.)

MUSIC: HEIST MUSIC.

BUDDY:

As I think you've already gathered, our work isn't exactly on the spotless side of the law. My friend and I work in the craft of what we call "relocation services."

JUNO:

Which I'm guessing means you relocate other people's things to your pockets.

BUDDY:

My, you are quick. They aren't always "things," but... spot-on.

JUNO:

So is that what you need me for? Some kind of heist? Cuz-

BUDDY:

No, no, the heist has been finished for weeks. It's the sale, darling. We need you to help us with the sale.

JUNO:

You... want me to work the cash register on your black market deal?

JACKET:

The sale is the most dangerous part of any job in the Cerberus Province.

JUNO:

(SURPRISED YELP)

Where the hell did you come from?!

JACKET:

The door.

BUDDY:

Do try and focus, Juno. Yes, the sale. This town is crawling with undercover law enforcement and people who expect you to do your work for free but don't feel like telling you ahead of time, and neither sits particularly well with me. So we're going to make certain we get paid, or else we're not handing over anything.

JUNO:

Yeah, okay. And speaking of which, what are we selling?

BUDDY:

The sale's in three hours, in this bar. We've agreed to meet somewhere public, which means within the next three hours we'll have to make this place public. We're opening it for business.

JUNO:

We're...

(PAUSE)

Wait, you own the Lighthouse?

BUDDY:

Just the first floor. I couldn't sell it if I wanted to, honestly; too much radiation leaks in through the roof for anyone to want it. At any rate, once we're open my big friend is going to work the bar; you're going to play sad drunk at one of those tables by the door.

JACKET:

You will be drinking carbonated tea. Focus will be crucial.

JUNO:

Sounds like a fun party.

BUDDY:

While the buyer and I make the exchange, you will watch the

crowd and contact me on covert comms if you notice anyone acting strangely. We take no chances here, do you understand? This is too important.

JUNO:

Okay, but what are we sell-

BUDDY:

Hopefully it all goes off without a hitch and you get paid for sitting around and enjoying some tea. Then we'll show you how to remove that eye and you can decide whether this kind of work interests you.

JUNO:

I feel like I could answer that question a lot faster for you if I knew what we were selling.

BUDDY:

There's no need to get snippy, Juno. You only needed to ask. Show him.

SOUND: JACKET PUTS A BRIEFCASE ON THE TABLE.

We will be selling this briefcase.

JUNO:

And... what's inside the briefcase?

BUDDY:

Oh, that's none of your concern.

JUNO:

Well, if I wasn't concerned before, I sure as hell am now! Listen, I told you, if you make me do anything-

SOUND: JACKET SLAMS THE TABLE.

MUSIC: THE HEIST MUSIC STOPS THE SECOND HE HITS THE TABLE.

JACKET:

You listen.

BUDDY:

Thank you.

(STERN)

I understand that the word of an outlaw probably doesn't mean much to you, Juno, but it will mean even less if you don't let me finish a sentence.

JUNO:
(FRUSTRATED GRUNT)

BUDDY:
You can't have it both ways. You can't both know everything
and live a life just for yourself. You understand that,
don't you?

MUSIC: SAD MUSIC FADES IN.

(AFTER A PAUSE)
If you aren't sure you want to stay here? Then don't stay.
Don't get involved. That's how Hyperion hurt you, isn't it?

I don't think that's your fault, of course. That's just
what cities do. Once you get attached to somewhere, or
someone... you can't break apart without leaving some of
yourself behind.

JUNO:
(PAUSE)
Where the hell is that sappy music coming from, anyway?
It's driving me nuts.

BUDDY:
What mu...
(SHE HEARS IT)
Oh, that. Darling, would you?

JACKET:
(GRUNT)

SOUND: JACKET HITS THE MACHINE.
MUSIC: STOPS SUDDENLY.

BUDDY:
Thank you. Semi-Autonomous Music Machines. They're all over
the Province and they all act like this. You'll tune them
out eventually.

JUNO:
Alright, so. You want me to watch the door while you make
your trade-off. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious,
and...

JACKET:

Don't use your eye.

JUNO:

Yeah, thanks, I got that. Anything else?

BUDDY:

Just one thing.

(TO JACKET)

Give him his weapon.

SOUND: JACKET PUTS A BIG GUN DOWN ON THE TABLE. JUNO PICKS IT UP AND EXAMINES IT.

JUNO:

There's... no stun on this.

JACKET:

Laserproof vests are too common in these jobs. That will punch through them.

JUNO:

So you just want me to kill someone? Cuz you say so?

BUDDY:

I assure you that if anything goes wrong, he'll deserve it.

JUNO:

But—

BUDDY:

Then don't. Use your last few hours of freedom and walk to an early death in the desert, based on the fear that something might go wrong, you might have to shoot, and the shot you fire might kill them. But those seem like silly odds to throw your life away on.

(MEANINGFUL PAUSE)

My business and my past are my concerns, Juno. Just do the job, and don't get involved. Then you go and do whatever it is you want to.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Don't get involved.

I kept repeating that to myself for the next three hours, as we cleaned the place up and opened the doors and let the crowd filter in. The gun was heavy in my pocket. I wished I'd taken my blaster off the Piranha. But it was too late.

She was gone. The whole life I'd known her in was gone.

And meanwhile, in this life, the sale was just a few minutes away. I sat at my table by the door and watched the crowd mob the bar, the big guy toss drinks, and Buddy schmooze like she knew everyone here personally.

SOUND: COMMS BEEP.

BUDDY:

I've just received confirmation that he'll be here shortly. Anything strange on either of your ends?

JUNO:

(JOKING NERVOUSLY)

Yeah, now that you mention it, I've been meaning to have a dermatologist take a-

JACKET:

Do not complete this joke, Juno, or you will regret it.

JUNO:

Ooooookay.

JACKET:

There is nothing over here.

BUDDY:

Juno?

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I listened in to the crowd around me, all the faces and costumes of crime. And I didn't hear anything weird about them - but plenty about Buddy.

GUESTS:

The Lighthouse, open again! Can you believe it?

Buddy Aurinko, after all this time!

Buddy's back! It's been, what, seven years?

Has anyone seen Buddy? She was always the talk of the town, I hear...

(ALIEN LANGUAGE)

Kakh nalala Buddy! Buddy, *sha*, Buddy!

BUDDY:

Juno?

JUNO:

Buddy Aurinko...? Hang on, is your name actually Buddy?

BUDDY:

That's what I told you to call me, isn't it?

JUNO:

So, what, is his name actually The Big Guy?

JACKET:

That would be absurd.

JUNO:

Then what is it?

JACKET:

We are not there yet.

JUNO:

We're not at *names*?

BUDDY:

Quiet, you two! He's just come in the door! Do you see him, Juno?

JUNO:

Little guy, gray monosuit, looks kinda like he's allergic to light?

BUDDY:

That's the one.

JUNO:

Doesn't look like a crime boss. Too nervous.

JACKET:

Not a good sign.

BUDDY:

Experience suggests that might just be his face, actually.

RASBACH:

Eh... what was that?

BUDDY:

Ah, there you are, Mr. Rasbach. It's been too long.

RASBACH:

We... spoke yesterday, I think?

BUDDY:

Yes, but you are late, and that does mean it's been too long, doesn't it?

RASBACH:

(A PAUSE. THEN A NERVOUS LAUGH)

Ah, I see. You must excuse me, Miss Buddy, both my tardiness and my uncomprehending. Solar is not my... language initial.

BUDDY:

I'm only razzing you, Razzy. You manage much better here than I would on Balder, I'm sure. Please, sit. Would you like a drink? Two drinks? You'll have to forgive me for trying to upsell you, but a small business owner has to keep her claws sharp.

RASBACH:

It... does not appear you starve of the business. Yesterday this bar was not even in operation, and today...

BUDDY:

I've been away a long time, and I'm impatient. Surely you know how that is. I imagine you must miss Balder terribly.

RASBACH:

Is so, is so.

(NERVOUS LAUGH)

And yet... there are the creds to be made in these planets Solar, yes? A business top profitable. Do you know how it is to support a family, Miss Buddy?

BUDDY:

I pick my own family, Raz, and the first thing I make sure of is that they can support themselves.

RASBACH:

Perhaps is so here, but on the Outer Rim, after the War... this is not always possible. My planetmen, they desperate, eh? They take the first ship from Balder they can find,

they swallow the poisoning radiation, they need the healthcare to live, and so we give them this support... for the price. We support them, then support we - is a cycle top beautiful, I think.

BUDDY:

Do you mind if we get on with this? I have customers to attend to.

RASBACH:

Of course.

(PAUSE. THEN HE CLEARS HIS THROAT)

Shall we... eh, show the wares?

JACKET:

Watch the crowd, Juno. This is the moment.

SOUND: BUDDY PUTS HER BRIEFCASE ON THE TABLE, UNLATCHES IT, AND OPENS. THERE IS A HISS OF GAS AS IT OPENS.

JUNO (NARRATOR):

I wanted to see what the hell was in that briefcase, but... I tried to remember what Buddy told me. It was none of my business. Don't get involved.

So instead I scanned the crowd. And that's when I saw her come in through the back door.

JUNO:

Big guy, our friend with the hood from earlier just showed up. Didn't you say you lost her?

JACKET:

What is she doing?

JUNO:

Nothing yet...

RASBACH:

This is really... the Curemother. You have it.

BUDDY:

Now. You pay me, you take this, and your group makes just oodles and oodles of money for you to send back to all the little orphans and victims and puppy-dogs on Balder, or whatever your story is today. Do you even have children, Razzy, or is all that just a story?

RASBACH:

Does it affect our business, whether or not is so?

BUDDY:

I suppose not.

RASBACH:

Now, the transaction. We will be using my comms, as agreed.

SOUND: BEEPING AS HE SETS IT UP.

Security transactional set to the audio, then the fingerprint...

BUDDY:

Are we ready?

RASBACH:

You read the bill of sale first, yes? Ensure is no confusion.

BUDDY:

Alright.

JUNO:

You see her, Buddy?

BUDDY:

Ah, yes. Over by the Music Machine, not moving.

RASBACH:

Eh, what?

BUDDY:

Oh, forgive me, Razzy. A Solar colloquialism - if something is "by the Machine and not moving," that means it's straightforward. The money is to be transferred directly from your account to mine, and the key to the Curemother's briefcase from my account to yours.

RASBACH:

Ah. I have not heard this expression before.

BUDDY:

(QUICKLY)

And you never will again.

(QUICKLY)

"I, Buddy Aurinko, consent to this transaction." And the fingerprint...

SOUND: HAPPY BEEP.

Your turn.

RASBACH:

Ah, thank you.

JUNO:

She's moving. Buddy, you've got someone coming right at you!

RASBACH:

I, Rasbach the Eldest, Agent Acquisitional of the Cerberus Board of Fresh Starts...

BUDDY:

What's your game, Rasbach?

RASBACH:

My name? Miss Buddy, I was just saying—

BUDDY:

Finish it, then. Quickly.

RASBACH:

I conzent to this transaction.

SOUND: HAPPY BEEP.

There. Is done.

JUNO:

He... did it? Really?

BUDDY:

It appears so, yes.

RASBACH:

Well. The business well done.

JUNO:

Buddy, look out! She's right on top of you!

RASBACH:

Well, Miss Buddy. It has been a pleasure—
(CHOKING, STABBED NOISES)

BUDDY:

Rasbach!

JUNO (NARRATOR):

The hooded woman ran up behind Rasbach, and without a sound a knife appeared in her hand. Then it disappeared, again... into Rasbach's back.

RASBACH:

Who... who...?
(OOF)

VESPA:

(GRUNT)

SOUND: RASBACH IS PUSHED TO THE GROUND.

You. Give me the briefcase.

JUNO:

Stall her. We're on our way.

BUDDY:

Stay where you are, the both of you!
(BEAT)
You don't have the key to this. What do you plan to do?
Break it open?

VESPA:

If you're real, just give it. If not... get out.

BUDDY:

You could damage what's inside if you do, and then what use will it be?
(PAUSE)
You... sound familiar. Do I know you?

VESPA:

I said get out!
(GROWL)

SOUND: FIGHT NOISES IN THE BACKGROUND.

JUNO (NARRATOR) :

Then they were really at it. Hood took quick jabs, lots of them, but Buddy was quick, too, working that briefcase like a shield too precious for her attacker to stab. It was a good defense, but Buddy's back was almost to the wall, and it wasn't going to be good much longer.

So Buddy raised her gun, to turn the tide. But with her focus split for just that half-second, hood slashed at her fingers with the knife.

Some people would've kept the briefcase instead of their hand, I thought. Buddy wasn't one of them. She let go - and hood had it before it hit the ground.

BUDDY:

She has the briefcase, but I can't get a clear shot with all these people!

JACKET:

She's running towards you, Juno. You know what to do.

JUNO (NARRATOR) :

My stomach and shooting-hand hardened. Still the same old Juno Steel, I thought. The Proctor, Swift, Pollock, Pilot, the Piranha... someone says "shoot," I say, "Who's next?"

The thought made me sick. I was tired. I was just so, so tired of making the same old mistakes, again and again.

VESPA:

Get out of my way!

JUNO (NARRATOR) :

So I made a new one instead.

VESPA:

Move!

JUNO:

No!

(A "HUP!" AS HE JUMPS AT HER)

VESPA:

(AN OOF, AS HE COLLIDES WITH HER)

BUDDY:

What do you think you're doing, Juno? Do you want her to stab you?

SOUND: SCHING! AND STAB.

JUNO:
Too late.

VESPA:
Move or I'll kill you.

JUNO:
Lady, if you knew the kinda week I've had, you'd understand why that doesn't scare me much.

SOUND: THE BIG MAGNUM GUNSHOT FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE EPISODE.
THE CROWD HUSHES FOR A MINUTE. PIECES OF CEILING CRUMBLE.

JACKET:
(YELLING OVER THE CROWD)
This is an emergency situation. All customers must leave immediately.

SOUND: CROWD MAKES PANICKED NOISES AND STARTS RUNNING FOR THE DOOR.

JUNO (NARRATOR):
The diversion was just enough to distract her for a second, so I tried to take a swing at her. She was too fast for me, and my fingers missed her face... but grabbed her scarf. And she... did not like that.

SOUND: SCARF PULLED AWAY.

VESPA:
(HOWLS)

JUNO (NARRATOR):
I could see why she'd covered herself, because she had a look too memorable for covert ops: bright green hair and bright, wild eyes. But I didn't know her.

Buddy did, though.

BUDDY:
(CALLING OVER THE CROWD)
... Vespa?

JUNO (NARRATOR):

Green-hair looked back, panicked, her eyes darting. She pulled so hard her sleeve came up... and I saw what was on her wrist.

A Debtor's Tag, for indentured servants. Just like that Outer Rim guy in the market. And hers had something written on it: "VESPA I.; Five."

"Vespa" was in a cold sweat. She looked like she was going to be sick.

VESPA:

Not real... you're not real...

BUDDY:

Vespa! It's you! I thought you were—

VESPA:

(SHOUTING, TERRIFIED)

You're not real! Get out of my *head*!

(FERAL GROWL, AND SHE SHOVES JUNO OUT OF THE WAY)

JUNO:

(OOF AND PAINED NOISES AS HE HITS THE GROUND)

SOUND: VESPA RUNS OFF, AND SO DOES THE CROWD.

BUDDY:

Vespa! Come back!

SOUND: COMMS BEEP.

JACKET:

(OVER COMMS)

Buddy... she's gone.

BUDDY:

(OVER COMMS)

She can't be gone. I saw her, I swear I saw her...

SOUND: THE PEOPLE IN THE BAR HAVE RUN OUT.

JUNO:

(IN PAIN, OVER COMMS)

You're gonna need to slow down a little for the murder

victim by the door, Buddy. Who the hell is Vespa?

BUDDY:

(AFTER A PAUSE)

She's... a dead woman. I saw her die. But now she's...

(CALLING)

Vespa! Vespa!

SOUND: SHE RUNS OUT.

JUNO:

Should we follow them?

JACKET:

That depends. Are you injured enough that running will cause your organs to fall out of your body?

JUNO:

Not *that* bad, but still pretty—

JACKET:

Then we hide the briefcase and Rasbach's corpse in the back room first. Then we follow. Quickly.

SOUND: THEY START MOVING. SOUND FADES.

Scene: 4

(HOLD ON, JUNO'S GONNA EXPLAIN WHERE WE AT IN LIKE A SECOND)

JUNO (NARRATOR):

We searched the streets for an hour. But Vespa was gone.

SOUND: LIGHTHOUSE DOOR OPENING. ALL THREE WALK IN.

JUNO:

(OW-ING A LOT AS HE WALKS)

JACKET:

You make that noise a lot, don't you.

JUNO:

Oh, sorry, does it bother you? Don't mind me, just the guy who's been playing peekaboo with his large intestine for

the past hour—OW, ow, ow.

JACKET:

You said your organs would not fall out.

JUNO:

It was a joke! Do big caveman get joke?

JACKET:

I do not know. I have never met one.

BUDDY:

Stop it. Immediately.

(A MOMENT TO BREATHE)

SOUND: SHE OPENS A DOOR.

(PAUSE)

Where's the briefcase?

JACKET:

We left it in the back room.

BUDDY:

I remember you saying that. But it isn't here. And neither is Rasbach.

(PAUSE, FOR A SIGH)

Well. It seems our sale was completed after all.

JACKET:

He took the Curemother?

JUNO:

He didn't *die*?!

JACKET:

But more importantly: we have the money?

BUDDY:

He couldn't take it even if he wanted to. Both of us would have to consent to another transaction. All sales final.

JUNO:

So... it's done. The sale's done. It... sounds like it worked out, right?

BUDDY:

Do business with a glorified slave-trader once, then wash my hands of it for good. That was always the plan. So yes, everything went according to plan. But... Vespa... karma comes in all shapes, doesn't it?

JACKET:
Buddy...

BUDDY:
Her Debtor's Tag, Juno. What number was on it?

JUNO:
What—

BUDDY:
I know she had one. I've been thinking about it for an hour and that's the only option that makes sense. Just tell me what it said.

JUNO:
(AFTER A PAUSE)
It was, uh... Five.

BUDDY:
Five.
(PAUSE. THEN, TO HERSELF)
Five years... I can't...
(SIGH)
Thank you for not shooting her, Juno. I've already lost her once. Losing her again... I think that would be the end of me.
(A DEEP BREATH)
The number on the debtor's tag is the number of years they've been... owned. Vespa has been in the Cerberus Province without rest for five years. It's a miracle that the radiation hasn't killed her, unless... Five years... Vespa, where have you been...?

JUNO (NARRATOR):
You could tell from the look in Buddy Aurinko's eyes that the number of years wasn't what bothered her. It could've been five months or five weeks or five minutes, and it all would've amounted to the same thing: she felt hope, and she was terrified of it.

The presumed-dead were walking in the Cerberus Province, and that was a nightmare. Because there's peace when a hope

finally dies, when it stops moving and you can nail the coffin shut.

Buddy looked like she'd won that peace the hard way. But there was movement in the coffin, now, something pounding the lid from the inside. And if that old hope was so hard to bury the first time... who knew what kind of damage it could do the second.

TO BE CONTINUED