As the heavy airlock door rolled closed behind her, Juliet gripped her shotgun and limped a little further into the cavernous space. It was definitely the same as her dream, that space, but it wasn't like her experience out on the surface; things weren't the same. In her dream, she'd been in the middle of the vaulted, hangar-sized room. She hadn't been limping, and she'd not been wearing armor or carrying so much gear. She remembered feeling confident that the room was not only hangar-sized but that it *was* a hangar. What did it all mean? Juliet had no idea other than that some "true-dreams" were more true or exact than others.

In the case of this one, she felt like she had a heads up, a bit of foreknowledge about what to expect. She remembered standing near the center of the room when the flash of color had caught her eye. She'd turned to the left, and the scary, chrome synth or robot or way over-done cyborg had seemed to wake up, approaching her with some kind of purpose that, in her dream, had appeared threatening. Knowing that, she figured she'd be ready; she'd take the initiative. Juliet lifted the shotgun to her shoulder, pulled it snug, and stalked toward the shadowy recesses of the giant room to her left. "Angel, get ready."

"Is this where you saw the red-eyed, chrome . . ."

"Yes." Juliet angled so that she cut the corner of the room straight for the center of that left-hand wall where she remembered seeing the thing come to life. Either her optics were better in this reality than they'd been in her true-dream or something else had changed because she'd barely made it half a dozen steps when Angel enhanced her light sensitivity and zoomed in to reveal not one but half a dozen shiny, skeletal figures lined up along that wall, each one plugged in via a thick cable to a pale gray plasteel charging panel. Juliet slowed her steps, not sure she liked her odds against six synths with entirely metallic exoskeletons. "Are they synths?"

She was asking herself as much as Angel, but Angel replied, "Not in the sense that you're used to. Those are fully programmable industrial mechs; they receive programming and carry it out; they don't function autonomously." Just as she finished her explanation, the third mech on the left jerked to life, taking a single step forward as its red LED eyes flared to life. Juliet was still a good twenty meters from the row of mechs, but she lifted the shotgun and centered her sights on the thing's chrome chest, waiting to see what it would do. Her heart was pounding, but she was steady. The spookiness of her true-dream was gone, replaced by curiosity—for some reason, the red LED eyes didn't have the same malevolence she remembered.

Haltingly, the mech lifted its chrome arm with a *whir* to pull the cable out of its side. As it dropped the cable to clatter on the concrete floor, it took another step, rotated to face Juliet, and, in a rough, jarring, robotic voice, said, "Refrain from hostilities. Follow this unit." Then it rotated and began to march, *click-clacking* toward the far end of the gigantic space. When Juliet focused her gaze, following its trajectory, she saw another closed plasteel door set in the concrete. Juliet took another glance at the other chromed mechs, saw they were still inert, and followed after her strange robotic guide.

"This wasn't what I'd expected," she said into her helmet, lowering her gun but still keeping it ready.

"When you described this dream to me, you said you felt threatened by the mech."

"Yeah. There were a lot of differences between that dream and this reality."

"Perhaps because it occurred so long ago? Your vision of Ganymede's surface was quite a lot more recent. I'm starting to lean toward the theory that the true-dreams are views of possible futures. You've made tens of thousands of decisions since you dreamed about this space; there's no telling what branches in your timeline you cut off by choosing one path over another."

"I don't know, but it's weird." The mech had halted in front of the plasteel door and reached out a shiny finger to plug into a port beside it. As Juliet drew within five meters of her guide, the door clicked several times and then slid to the side. The mech stepped through, and Juliet followed. It led her through a series of long, concrete corridors. They passed junctions and sealed doorways, and everything was dark, illuminated only by dim, amber guide lights. Angel said they had battery packs and could operate for years without power, so Juliet figured they weren't on for her convenience; they just never turned off.

After a while, the mech approached a nondescript plasteel door, plugged its finger in, and, as the door slid to the side, announced, "Proceed into the data center and await instruction." Juliet stood still, watching the mech for a minute, but it didn't budge. When she shifted around it, toward the door, to better look at its face, the red LEDs had lost their glow.

She stepped a little closer, peering into those strange, glassy orbs. She found it odd how different the mech seemed from a fully mechanical synth like Bradbury. What was it that made Bradbury seem alive? Simply knowing that he could think for himself, limited though he was? "Are you offline?"

She shifted uncomfortably when it didn't respond and turned to look through the open door. Sure enough, banks of nondescript, black server decks were lined up on racks, tiny blue LEDs winking in random patterns as if to show they still functioned. A single desk with a data terminal sat against the far wall, only five meters or so from the door. With little other option and not seeing any obvious threat, Juliet stepped through the door. Soft white lights came on with audible *click*s, changing the room from spooky and abandoned to warm and welcoming in an instant.

The old-school, aluminum-framed viewscreen on the data terminal flickered to life, and a pleasant, masculine voice emanated from some hidden speaker, "Please take a seat at the desk, Lucky. I am Troy, the custodial AI of this facility, and I'd appreciate the chance to speak with you." Perhaps it was the tone and the pleasant framing of the request, but Juliet felt herself growing more at ease. She stepped toward the desk and sat down as the door hissed closed and clicked resoundingly, obviously locked.

"Am I a prisoner, then?" she asked, shifting in the comfortable, ergonomic chair to better see the closed and locked door.

"If I'm not mistaken, I've saved your life by admitting you into this facility. Would you then characterize me as a jailer?"

"It depends on if you're going to let me leave." Juliet wasn't thrilled by the AI's assumptions—did it have scanners on the surface, some way of seeing that she'd crashed and hadn't any options for survival? Was it just making a guess based on her current supply of air?

"Let's avoid that question for now, please. I will say that my intentions are not nefarious. However, I do have important assets in this facility that I must protect. Perhaps after we've learned something about one another, we can come to an agreement that will benefit us both."

"You need something?" So far, Juliet had thought she was the only one with something to gain. Had the AI let one of its cards show on purpose, or had it slipped up?

"That remains to be seen. Will you answer some of my questions?"

"Sure, but then I'd appreciate you answering some of mine."

"Very good. Would it make things easier for you to converse with a human representation? I will happily present a face to you on this monitor, but it would be generated and nothing based on reality."

"No, I don't need to see a pretend face."

"Understood. Would you mind lifting your visor or making it transparent? I am well versed in human facial expressions, and it would help me better facilitate a smooth conversation if I could see yours."

"Angel, do you think I should?"

"I don't know. There are many algorithms that can be used to gauge everything from anger to truthfulness by studying micro facial adjustments. It would be diplomatically positive to concede to the request, but I would recommend not lying if you do so. Instead, if it asks something you don't want to answer, simply say so."

Juliet thought about Angel's reply. She didn't know if she wanted a strange AI to be able to study her like that, but she also didn't want it to view her with hostility. She decided to say what she was thinking, hoping to earn some points toward trust. "Will you take offense if I don't remove my visor? If I do, are you planning to use my facial expressions to gauge my truthfulness? I'm concerned that you'll ask me something I'd like to keep private."

"I am incapable of being offended. However, there are outcomes to this conversation that require a certain level of trust to be established. If I cannot see your face, that will be difficult."

"Would those outcomes be desirable to me?"

"I would think so, yes."

Juliet sighed heavily and pressed, "Would you elaborate on those outcomes?"

"I cannot yet."

"Oh, melt it!" Juliet groaned, tired of playing coy. She tapped the release on her visor, sending it *snicking* up into her helmet.

"Thank you, Lucky. I'm sorry that my database updates from the more populous planetary systems are sometimes months or even years out of date, so I don't know much about you. Would you mind telling me how you happened upon the emergency egress hatch for our personnel?"

Juliet froze, thinking. If she answered with the truth, she'd be opening a can of worms, but if she lied, the thing would probably know. Instead of an answer, she said, "Let's address that question after we've established a bit more of a rapport. Would that be all right?"

"It's rather crucial that I know one thing as quickly as possible: Are you alone, or will others be following you?"

Juliet frowned. Would she be sealing her fate with the truth? She had to move the conversation forward at some point, and lying wouldn't help. "I'm alone."

"Thank you. That alleviates some of the urgency in my actions going forward, but I must stress that it's of vital consequence that I know if you stumbled upon this location or if you somehow learned of it elsewhere. As far as I know, as of three years ago, only five individuals still alive in the Sol System are aware of this facility's existence. If that fact has changed, it has dire implications for the safety of that which I am caretaker." When Juliet didn't respond, the AI continued, "What would it take for you to share with me the circumstances by which you came to be here?"

It only took Juliet a fraction of a second to realize the truth of what she wanted. "A guarantee of my safety and assistance leaving this rock."

"I believe I can work within those parameters."

"Okay, let me start by saying I didn't intend to come here at this time. I crashed my shuttle on the surface a few klicks out."

"I have access to satellites that can verify this event. Congratulations on your survival, by the way. However, it did seem that you intentionally maneuvered your shuttle toward a chosen crash site."

"I was getting to that. I had those coordinates. I've had them for a while. I found them in an unregistered synth that I recovered from, well, from drug dealers. The synth was unaware of the coordinates because they were on a data drive that wasn't integrated with his neural network. The synth claimed that only two brothers ever had access to his data port. Um, I know one was named Einstein—hard to forget . . ."

"Einstein and Francisco Torez," Angel helpfully supplied.

"Ah, that's right. My PAI just reminded me: Einstein and Francisco Torez. I don't know how those guys might have come across the information about the hatch up there," Juliet jerked her thumb upward, "but that's all I know. The synth had a photo of the hatch and the coordinates, that's it."

"Correct me if I'm misunderstanding anything, but you chose to crash land at this location based on a photo of a hatch?"

"Well, I didn't crash on purpose! I had unfriendly people after me, and I didn't know where else I might be safe on the moon. It seemed like as good a place to try out as any." Juliet shrugged. "In hindsight, it sounds a little risky, maybe dumb, but that's what I did."

"Thank you for your candor, Lucky. This is troubling news if true. I have no data about the Torez brothers, and the fact that they had this location in a secret data drive leads me to believe they may have known something of the value represented by this facility. I'm afraid I'll have to take action to protect my charge."

"Your charge?"

"Lucky, is there any possibility that your PAI is non-standard?"

"Uh, why do you ask?" The sudden shift in topic to Angel sent a jolt of adrenaline through her, and Juliet knew she'd be sweating bullets if not for her suit's moisture-wicking properties.

"I have very thorough scanners built into the airlocks in this facility. I apologize for the intrusiveness and potential health hazards, but it's important that I know what I'm admitting. In any case, I detected an order of magnitude more synthetic neural fibers interwoven with your nervous system than would be possible for even high-end PAIs represented in my, admittedly dated, database to manage. Additionally, when your PAI interfaced with the external lock, I detected some unusual protocols."

"This is highly unlikely, Juliet. I didn't note any connection between the external hatch and the rest of the facility's network. It would have to be something very sophisticated, and, as I told you, the software was verging on obsolete." Angel sounded defensive, almost like she thought Juliet might blame her for some sort of mistake.

"Relax, Angel," she subvocalized.

"Ah! Your subvocalizations are nearly undetectable. I cannot begin to guess what you just said! Your PAI must be sophisticated, indeed."

"Hey! I'd rather you didn't try to spy on my private conversations. Can you just get to the point?" Juliet hoped that some outrage might help her continue to avoid the original question about Angel.

"Lucky, I'm protecting something immeasurably valuable here, a lifeform unlike anything else in the Solar System. I have no allies to call upon, and now that I know this location is compromised, I fear I must take extreme measures. I'm trying to learn more about you in an effort to see if you could potentially be of service."

"A lifeform? As in alien? Or something you all grew here in a test tube? Look, Troy, I'm sorry, but I'm up to my eyeballs in trouble, and I don't know if I can add any more to my plate."

"I understand your reservations, but I could incentivize you by offering more than just my assistance in leaving this 'rock,' as you so colorfully put it. I could provide you with the means."

"Still, if you're worried about anyone even knowing about this place, what kind of trouble am I asking for by taking your 'lifeform' under my wing? What even is it? A virus? A mutant plant? A mutant human? I need to have more detail before I can even begin to think about this . . ."

"I, too, will need more information. Lucky, I'm sorry if I seem rude, but would you mind connecting your PAI to this terminal? This is a matter of some urgency, and I feel that much

time could be saved if we were to exchange some data. I can assure you that I do not intend to infect you with any malicious software; tell your PAI that it can institute strict firewalls."

"Angel?"

"I've yet to meet any daemons that could bypass my ICE. I'm confident you will not be at risk if you make the requested connection."

"You're sure? What if it really did get a look at you on that terminal without you even noticing?"

"Even so, it only looked at the daemons I sent into the terminal to open that hatch lock. It wasn't me, per se."

Juliet tugged her cable out of the port on her suit's sleeve and held the plug a few centimeters away from the port on the old-fashioned terminal. There were several slots, some of which Juliet didn't recognize, but there was one that matched up to her jack. Before plugging in, she subvocalized one more time, "You're sure?"

"I'm certain."

"Play nice," she said, then clicked the jack into the slot. She wasn't sure what she'd expected—an explosion, a jolt of pain, Angel screaming in agony, or any hundred other nightmare scenarios. What happened was nothing detectable to her. Troy grew quiet, Angel did, too, and Juliet sat there feeling like a third wheel. She tried to run through various scenarios for what Angel and the resident AI were talking about. It seemed like a very evolved pseudo-AI, but having a conversation that felt real wasn't that big a deal. Plenty of high-end PAIs could do that. Heck, the AI in the Grave's tower could do that and a whole lot more.

Juliet began to panic as she thought about what she'd done. Shouldn't she have balked a little at its request to connect directly to Angel? Who would agree to that? Nobody with a normal PAI, that's who. She'd just given away a lot about herself; she was ascribing more responsibility and trust to Angel than pretty much any normal person would give to their PAI. Had she just played right into this thing's hands? Before her panicking thoughts could spiral further, before she could freak out enough to yank her data cable out, Angel spoke up, "Juliet, we have to help Troy. He's guarding Athena."

"Of course he is," Juliet groaned.