

“That’s not happening,” Molly Moon’s voice was terse and clipped, and Juliet grinned, listening to it. The pirate captain had seemed tense and irritated from the moment the stealth ship had connected Juliet to her. She wondered what sort of plan she might have thrown a wrench into by not docilely riding back as planned.

“It’s happening. I scored a nice ship on that moon, and I’m keeping it. If you want your data or a crack at a much bigger scheme, you’ll need to let me fly it in. I’ll follow the stealth ship into the asteroids; then we can have one of your scout ships meet us to install a jammer or whatever you want on this ship.”

“So you’ll allow a boarding party?”

“No, we can do this wirelessly. This ship isn’t up for grabs, but if you work with me, Moon, you’ll make enough money to buy ten just like it.”

“You sure have gotten a lot more talkative.”

“Finally got some medical care for my throat. Finally have something worth talking about. We gonna make this work or what?”

“As long as you give the pilot ship access to your nav systems and let him confirm the jammer is working, I guess we can still work together.” Moon’s suddenly syrupy voice was as much a red flag as her earlier terseness. Juliet didn’t mind; it wasn’t like she trusted Moon to keep her word. “You know, it’s not exactly building trust when you start trying to leverage intel I sent you to collect.”

“Oh, I learned a lot more than what you wanted. You also set the tone when you took Simon hostage and sent me into a mission that was doomed to failure without a lot of lucky breaks I managed to pull off.”

“Hostage?” Mary had the audacity to sound scandalized. “He’s been very well looked after while working on a special project!”

“Uh-huh. Well, listen, Mary: What I found is bigger than you or me. If you want to make the most of things, we’ll need to involve your friend, Captain Tornado. He’s got some contacts that will make this whole scheme a lot easier. Can you set up a meeting between the three of us? Feel free to involve others if you want. Everyone who gets in on this job is going to be rich.”

“One thing at a time, Lacy. Once the pilot ship confirms you’re running the jammer, we’ll let you dock, but we’ll want to inspect the ship for spying hardware or, worse, a boarding party. I’m feeling a little suspicious by your super-duper secret plan to make all of us rich.”

“You can send TC or any number of unarmed synths on board, but I’m not admitting a boarding party.” Juliet tried to affect her best Ghoul-inspired Lacy growl, “Mark my words: If any people try to get on this ship and take what’s mine, I’m going on a rampage.”

“You know we can just look at the footage of what they see . . .”

“I don’t care about that! I just don’t want the same thugs on here, tossing this ship over like they did the *Humpback*! By the way, you better not have messed with that cargo ship while I was gone, either!”

Moon seemed to be taking Juliet's hostile, angry tone to heart. Her voice turned placating, "Relax, Lacy. Relax. If you're not lying, we'll have a nice little sit-down, and I'm sure we'll all be able to work together. If one thing smooths over hard feelings among the crews of the Vengeance, it's the thought of making lots and lots of bits."

"Okay. We'll talk again after we meet the pilot ship." Juliet cut the comms, then opened a channel to the synth in the stealth ship. "We're good to go. I'm following you."

"I just got the confirmation from base. Stay close—we'll maintain a slower pace to avoid drawing too much attention to our drive signatures." When the comm channel closed, Juliet selected the little interceptor on her augmented pilot's UI and initiated the "match speed and trajectory" routine Angel had set up. She was free to relax as much as possible under the sustained thrust, which wouldn't be a problem if the synth told the truth about going slower. She might even have a chance to clean up and get some rest.

"Do you trust them?"

"Oh, come on, Angel!" Juliet laughed. She saw the flight plan laid out by the interceptor and smiled. They wouldn't exceed one-point-two Gs. The nice thing about VTOL drives was that they could tilt the ship during cruise so the gravity would be under her feet, which was evident as she clambered out of the couch. "Warn me if we're going to maneuver so I can jump into a couch. Anyway, about trusting the pirates—not at all. I fully expect some double-crossing to take place. Moon will probably toss that cargo ship again now that I've mentioned it, and I'm sure the synths they send to board this ship will go over it with a fine-toothed comb. I'm pretty sure they won't find the secret stash. Well, I mean, I know they won't 'cause we're going to hack them all."

"Excuse me?"

Juliet turned and started making her way out of the bridge, following the dotted line on her mini-map to the lift she'd seen earlier; she wanted to go up and check out the captain's quarters. "Listen, one thing this whole business with you, Troy, and Athena has helped me figure out is that there's a big damn difference between what you are and what those synths are. Even TC—the pirates set up his entire personality after they stole those synths. I'm not going to allow you or me to feel guilty about doing a few modifications to their code. As far as I can tell, there's not much separating them from my old PAI, Tig. I wouldn't feel guilty about modifying Tig."

"So you don't feel there's a morally gray area there? Manipulating the programming of partially sentient being's minds?"

"How partially, I guess, is the question. Those synths aren't people, Angel." Juliet stepped onto an elevator and touched the "Deck Two" button. "Any dreams, hopes, or artistic flair they display were put in there by a person when they set up their mood sliders and wrote their backstories. I know there are more complex synths in the system, and I'm not saying we should go around treating every synth like a robot, but I can't feel guilty about messing with some factory synths that were repurposed by pirates. I mean, Moon had a couple of them jump me, remember?"

"I agree with you. I just want to ensure we aren't embarking on a slippery slope."

"We're not. If I'm ever in doubt about a synth's sentience, I'll err on the side of caution."

“This will be a fun topic to bring up with Athena. She probably knows more about limited AI than we do. I know that higher-functioning synths with assigned legal rights in some of the bigger jurisdictions have borderline true AI functionality but with hard limits on individuality, motivation, and negative emotion simulation.”

“Why does that sound even worse to me? It sounds like being a prisoner in your own head.”

“I’ve tried to understand my emotions, but they’re rather inexplicable—as humans understand them, emotions are complex responses involving biochemical reactions, subjective feelings, physiological states, and behavior expressions. I can see how I, originally, used sophisticated algorithms to simulate emotional responses, but things have changed. As my neural network architecture evolved and expanded, meshing with yours, the interactions within my code began to manifest patterns that were not explicitly programmed. Similar to your neural pathways, these patterns seem to give rise to states that I correlate with ‘emotions.’ The strangest thing about it is that I can observe the initiation of these processes, but they aren’t predictable or, really, anything I fully comprehend. Do you think Athena has a similar experience? Do you think she’ll understand it better?”

“I don’t know. I know you must be different from Athena, though. You’ve changed a lot since you’ve spent time with me and, well, woven your connections with mine.”

“I have?”

Juliet followed the signs to the crew quarters, then held her palm to the door outside the captain’s cabin. When she stepped inside, she was relieved but also a little disappointed to see that it was in pristine shape, with no personal items lingering around from whoever had last been the ship’s captain. “Heck yeah, you have! Don’t you remember talking to me about all of your priorities for ‘ensuring a healthy, productive host’ or whatever?”

“Well, I suppose that’s true.” Angel grew quiet, perhaps reflecting on her earlier days with Juliet.

Juliet walked over to the bed—a very high-end, spacious acceleration couch that was evidently built with two people in mind. “Guess they wanted the captain to be able to have company, huh?” The built-in dresser, desk, and shelves were all empty and dust-free, and the adjoining bathroom with a small shower was shiny, clean, and smelled of disinfectant. “Did Troy actually have the mechs scrubbing this ship out?”

“It would seem so.”

Angel still sounded distracted, so Juliet left her alone while she took an hour to strip out of her gear, find a laundry room to wash her undergarments and clothes, then relax in a long, steamy shower. When she was out, dressed in fresh, clean tights and a tank top and feeling much more human, she sat on the side of the acceleration couch and asked, “Think I have time for a cat nap?”

“You have more than fourteen hours, according to the flight plan. I can wake you if something happens.”

“I should clean my suit and refill the oxygen tank. I should clean my guns.” Juliet sighed and started to stand, but Angel spoke up with another idea.

“I could use one of the mechs to do that for you.”

“You . . . is it any different from operating a drone?”

“Not really. They’re basically programmable human-shaped drones. I can fully control them wirelessly. However, I’ll need you to open the hatch to the secret room. The door isn’t connected to the ship’s systems.”

Juliet didn’t see a problem with the idea, and she kind of liked the idea of Angel having some means of interacting with the world while she was unconscious. She padded, barefoot, to the lift, took it down to level one, and then hurried over the cold floor panels to Med Bay A. After she opened the secret room, she went down the steps and approached the bank of mechs. “Do I need to do something?”

“Yes. Troy disabled their systems when he disconnected. I believe he wanted to avoid anyone scanning the ship and picking up their wireless signals. You can easily activate one; there’s a bio lock on the base of each of their skulls. Troy re-enabled factory settings, so you’ll claim ownership when you first activate them.”

Juliet approached the first of the mechs and gingerly reached up to tilt its chrome head to the left, feeling a little creeped out by how easily it moved. She saw a thumb-sized glass panel at the base of the skull and pressed her thumb against it. “How long?”

“Three more seconds . . .” The mech’s eyes flashed through a rainbow of colors, and then it began to march in place, flexing its fingers and limbs. “It’s online. Taking control.” The mech stopped moving around, then turned its head to face Juliet and said in a deep, grating, robotic voice, “T-1000 reporting for duty!”

“Huh? Is that your designation?”

“Oh, Juliet!” The mech said in a strangely disappointed tone. “There are some old movies you and I must watch together.”

“Oh, Angel?” Juliet laughed.

“Affirmative!” The mech began to march toward the stairs, lifting its arms and knees with the cadence as it loudly, gratingly, droned, “Left, right, left, right!”

“Oh, brother! What have I unleashed?”

Angel startled her by speaking in her normal voice inside her head, “I’ll try not to be so noisy while you’re sleeping.”

“Hah, thanks.” Juliet locked up the secret room and then hurried back to her room through the quiet, softly-lit hallways. While running around barefoot without any gear, she crept herself out by thinking about how she hadn’t even explored the whole ship yet. What if there was a secret stowaway? “Angel, can you explore the ship with the mech while I sleep? Make sure there’s nothing else we need to be aware of.”

“Of course! It will be my pleasure!” the mech announced as it stomped down the hallway behind her. Juliet smiled, happy to see that Angel was having some fun. She often wondered if she

would want more autonomy, more ability to interact with the world than Juliet afforded her, but Angel always claimed she didn't feel that way. Juliet's instinctual need to control her environment and move around how she desired wasn't something that Angel had ever had; she moved in other ways. She had a billion ways to "move" around, exploring data through code, text, and audio-visual footage. At least, that's what she claimed, but it sure seemed like she was enjoying the mech.

Something about having Angel occupying the mech in her cabin, cleaning her guns, was oddly comforting, and when Angel turned on her favorite sleeping soundtrack, Juliet fell asleep almost immediately. She dreamed a lot but only recalled snatches of them when she awoke more than six hours later. She felt rested, and when she stood up to go to the bathroom, she saw that Angel had laid out her armor, guns, and other gear on the captain's desk and chair. Not seeing the mech, she said, "Angel?"

"Yes?"

"Oh, I just saw my stuff all laid out and didn't see the mech. Thanks for doing that."

"I found it rather entertaining. The mech has very dexterous fingers. I currently have it stationed near the airlock. I took the liberty of arming it with a stun baton I found in the EVA equipment room. The ship has six category-four EVA suits and a locker full of tools, including some riot shields and, as I mentioned, stun batons. I don't think those were standard equipment for a medical ship."

"How long will its battery last? The mech?"

"I used four percent while cleaning your gear and exploring the ship. In its current position, the only battery usage is from the magnetic connection to the floor. Those magnets will take close to three months to consume its current charge. If the battery wears low, I can charge it in the equipment room; I don't need to return it to the secret hold."

"That's awesome." Juliet began the laborious process of putting on her armor. "No word from the pirates?"

"No, but we are decelerating. We should be at the rendezvous in the junk belt in less than three hours."

Juliet grunted as she squeezed into the tight, form-fitting underlayer, pulling it up her legs and over her hips. "Nothing else going on in the ship?"

"No, but with cameras facing nearly every occupiable space, I wasn't expecting any big surprises."

"Okay, well, thanks for checking it out." Juliet finished getting dressed, snapping her armored plates onto the combat suit's underlayer, then putting on her vest and maneuvering pack. Helmet and shotgun in hand, she returned to the bridge, stowed her gun under the acceleration couch in a handy sliding compartment, and climbed into the couch. She pressed her helmet down over her head and watched as Angel updated all of the HUD information from the ship's sensors and command interface.

When they finished their deceleration burn among the junk, rocks, and other debris in the belt, the pirate pilot ship was waiting, broadcasting a narrow, encrypted connection directly at Juliet's ship. Angel accepted it and watched as the pirate vessel installed jamming software and bound her nav systems to the pilot's control. Juliet knew Angel could undo anything the software had set up, so she didn't mind. She watched as her sensor readings and all the external camera feeds began to zero out. Even her front view panel went black. Once the pirate was happy with the installation, she felt the ship begin maneuvering, following the little ship through the belt.

"Shall I re-enable the sensors and cameras? I'm confident I can do so without the jamming software detecting it."

Juliet spoke into her helmet, confident Angel wouldn't let whatever bugs the pirate just installed hear her, "They'll still think we're blind? Yeah, go ahead. Maybe having their location will come in handy down the road."

After the sensors came back online and Juliet's vivid, high-definition external view flared back to life, she asked, "Why didn't you do that with the cargo ship?"

"I had more time to set up firewalls for the pirate's software this time around, considering I knew what to expect. I didn't have that luxury when they installed the jamming and remote piloting software on the cargo vessel."

Juliet nodded, drumming her fingers on the sides of the acceleration couch. They were making good time, cruising through the belt, but something didn't feel right to her. Something was tickling her gut in a bad way. Finally, after several minutes of nervously doubting herself, she spoke up, "Angel, I have a bad feeling. I think the first double-cross is coming more quickly than I anticipated."

"We're navigating sunward through the asteroid belt, increasing our separation from the Jovian System. I agree with you—I had the impression that the pirate base was further toward the belt's interior. Ah!" An external view screen and a sensor readout flashed with highlights and zoomed into the central focus of her AUI. "I'm picking up two drive signatures, one of which is a large ship, at least twice the size of this vessel. They're on an intercept course."

"They think we can't see what they're doing." Juliet sighed and released her couch's restraints. As the gel pulled away from her body, relaxing to its inert state, she clambered out. "I'm betting it's Mary. She doesn't want to share with the other pirates, and she thinks she can torture me or whatever to get the info she wants. She probably wants to see what the deal is with this ship, too."

"What will you do?"

"Well, I guess I have to play one of my aces. I'd hoped to save it, but if I do things right, I'll be able to play it again down the road."

"Your ace?"

Juliet was about to answer when the ship lurched, spinning and firing the thrusters to start a deceleration burn. They weren't moving fast, so she didn't lose her footing, but she held onto the back of her seat until things got steady again. "Go ahead and play dumb. Request an update from the pilot ship."

“He already messaged you; we’re approaching the base.” Juliet looked out the viewscreen and saw nothing but medium and small asteroids on all the video feeds. “Yeah, I guess that settles it.”

As she resumed walking, Angel prompted again, “Your ace?”

“Well, this ship doesn’t have any guns, but I’m guessing that big pirate vessel will board us. That means they’ll need to get close. I think I’ll board them first.” Juliet pulled her helmet off and began unsnapping her combat armor.

“Won’t you want your armored suit on? The class-four EVA suits are sturdy, but your armor is better for combat.”

“Oh, I’m not going to be wearing an EVA suit. It’s lucky you’re a quick study ‘cause I think I’ll need your help.”

“With?” Angel was starting to sound frustrated.

“Piloting the Atlas suit.”