“Someone at the desk for you two,” Connelly said, with a glint in his eyes. Reid and Chen looked up with interest at the Inspector, who was currently moonlighting as their desk sergeant – wild grey-white hair trimmed a balding head and the flash in his eyes and grin on his face lent him an air of mad scientist.

“Are you actually enjoying your temporary downgrading?” Reid asked, mischievously.

“Oh yes – reconnects me with the public; when they look like what’s waiting at the desk, I enjoy it all the more: Martian, if I’m a judge, your colour,” he nodded at Reid. “And I’m pretty sure Chen will want to speak to her,” he added, before disappearing back through the door.

Reid cast an inquisitive look at her constable as she put down the fascinating piece of paperwork she’d been completing and made for the door. Chen grinned, having worked out who was out there. His grin changed to a broad smile when he saw the tall, red-haired woman waiting impatiently at the desk.

“I’m Angela – you spoke to me on Festival Eve about that book someone left outside my door?” she was speaking the second she recognised the two police officers, but the explanation wasn’t necessary, she’d clearly stuck in their minds.

“We remember you,” said Reid politely.

“Have you received anything else?”

“No, but I’ve been listening to rumours and reading the book – what can you tell me about the people… or things that delivered it to me?”

Reid and Chen glanced briefly at each other and agreed silently.

“Please step through,” Reid said.

***
"We haven't got any images of them arriving or leaving Moonbase. One of them was emitting an unusual sound frequency and slight radiation signature and on all the detectors and recorders on their observed route these both start and stop just before and just after the last sightings on camera. We're reasonably sure they left – we're assuming a matter transmitter, but they've used one without a base station...” Reid let the sentence hang.

“Pretty advanced technology they had access to then,” Angela said with a grin. “Come on, I've heard the rumours?” she looked at Reid, who was holding the playback controller. She pressed the button and the display showed the two figures emerging from a darkened corridor: the woman supporting herself on a stick and the hovering Robot.

“Wow!” Angela exclaimed with feeling. “A real, actual Robot,” she looked to the two police officers. “Has anything been done?” she asked, with concern.

Hairs in Chen’s mop bounced up as he blew from the corner of his mouth and emitted a single laugh. “People higher up the food chain than our Superintendent have decided it's a fake – someone’s Festival toy being flown around for party giggles,” he told her with evident disdain.

“You don't believe that?” Angela asked, her jade green eyes fixing on Chen.

“Unless you know of anyone who'd think you'd think it was funny to have a Robot give you a book on Robots?” he said, looking back at her, fighting the temptation to be lost in her rather beautiful face.

“No,” Angela shook her head, “I'm an industrial archaeology graduate, I have looked at Robot stuff, but until I got the book I hadn't taken a particular interest in them. I have now – I take it you think this thing was too sophisticated for a prank?”

“It was armed and it sliced,” Chen frowned as he finished his sentence, “the top off my helmet...” he waited for the inevitable giggle that swiftly followed from both women. “It was fast, accurate and powerful – if it wasn't a real Robot, it was certainly an unlicensed weapon that shouldn’t be on the loose,” he added with a slightly sheepish grin.

“The book was interesting on an aspect of how the Robots travelled between worlds,” Angela began, with a smile. She took the controller off Reid and rewound, “It makes mention of the use of hyperspace technology to create transport portals...”

“That someone could use without a ship?” Reid asked, fascinated.

“You've got,” Angela fiddled with the controller, “a set of readings for electromagnetic and radioactive emissions to coincide with when this happened. The book had a technical appendix giving the frequencies, emission data and profile of what one of these portals would look like – shall we compare?” she grinned as she extracted the data from the recording and figures began to fill a
display face. “Match!” she concluded, with relish as she began to circle and highlight figures given in the tables on the sheaf of copied pages she’d brought with her.

“So now what? I hate to point out a wrinkle, but there’s no way to know how genuine the book is – this could be a larger hoax,” Reid said, with a frown.

“I had the book dated, it’s in excess of five hundred years old – there’s matches for the radioactive isotope ratios present in Earth’s atmosphere from then and the Carbon dating is consistent,” Angela smiled. “Don’t worry, I didn’t travel all the way from Mars without doing some homework on this.”

“Why you?” Chen asked. “We looked you up after the incident to see if there was any connection to – well, anything – we could make and aside from your background, there’s no reason we could point to that you were given the book.”

“I think someone’s set a puzzle; we’ve no idea of how often this may have happened or where else it has happened – did you look for similar incidents? Did you find any?” the redhead asked.

“Yes, and no,” said Reid. “We did search records, we’re pretty sure someone would have noticed a Robot turning up and called either us, whoever their local police were or the press – nothing showed up.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe I’m being flattered then, because the book and your sensor readings together let me do more than confirm it’s a use of a portal, they give me a chance to track its origin!” her eyes flashed with suppressed excitement.

Reid and Chen’s mouths gaped.

“You can track it back to source?” Chen too, started to grin.

“Uh-huh, within a decent radius, provided the origin’s not more than a few million miles away,” Angela scooped a terminal pad out of the large holdall she’d brought with her and started to input figures off the ESPF’s sensor data. “And if it turns out to be somewhere we can get to – I’m taking it as an invitation to go and say thank you!” She looked quizzically at the two officers: “You would, I take it, like to find these characters and question them?”

***

The ESPF hopper skimmed close to the vast, dark lava plain, homing in on the radiation source. The portals, Angela had explained, emitted certain frequencies relating directly to how far from a point of origin they had been projected. For portals without a set of receiving-end equipment, that was effectively a limited range – so her hopes were high the origin could be elsewhere on the Moon. A radius was defined – potentially on the Moon – and satellite data mined for locations on the radius with matching radiation emissions. One target came up and they were now heading towards it.
“You’re confident in this being something real – not a hoax & not some fantasy by your archaeologist?” Superintendent Dan Brunskill was on the line to Reid.

“I heard that – I’m no flake; check my credentials, talk to Selsea University on Mars,” Angela snapped unhappily from the passenger seat behind Chen’s pilot seat.

“We have confirmed a consistent radiation emission, trace releases of breathable atmosphere and a large void just below the surface in the target location. There could be a settlement concealed below the surface, there are old mines in the area but nothing listed for this particular location so we’ve got some justification to investigate, boss,” Reid answered. From her co-pilot’s seat she looked back over her right shoulder to Angela, “Our technical boys confirmed the logic of the investigations Ms. Landau has done. I think we give her the benefit of the doubt and see what we find.”

“We’re approaching the co-ordinates now,” Chen said, as he began to slow the ship down. “Any ideas what we should be looking for?”

“Vehicle tracks,” Reid pointed down to the left.

Chen slowed the ship to a hover, the vibration of the main drive engines rotating to hold them in position travelled through the cabin. “I’m going to kick up quite a bit of dust doing this, might obliterate anything I pass over. The centre of the co-ordinates are ahead, so we’ll follow the track that way?”

Reid nodded and Chen nudged the craft forward.
They soon found it – a glint of metal in the grey betrayed the entranceway, partly hidden under an outcrop of rock, but too large to miss from ground level. It was large enough for a surface vehicle, but not their ship. Of course, in the virtually unchanging environment of the Moon, there was no telling how long the tracks had been there. This was an inconvenient fact for the first lunar builders when they realised all their excavations for Moonbases would be forever on show unless they put thought into tidying up – there being no rain and weather to flatten the soil back down, a freshly dug piece of ground looks the same the day it was done and one hundred years later on an airless world.

“I always find these metal environment suits odd,” Angela commented as they approached the entrance on foot. “If you lock the legs right you can actually sit on the crotch of the thing, like you’re riding a bike – not hugely comfortable, but at least you get a sit down,” she grinned. “We get lots of people using them to smuggle stuff in – some are a bit stupid though, you see someone in a fat man’s environment suit, but with a skinny face & you know to pull him the minute he’s in the docking corridors,” Chen commented.

“Makes you wonder why they aren’t all barrel-shaped – get all the supplies built in around the waist – no need for backpacks and complicated connections for air supplies?” Angela mused. “Be a bit better balanced as well, concentrate the weight over the feet.” Reid and Chen looked at her with a ‘that’s so stupid sounding it’s actually quite good’ look. The fact neither knew what to say in response wasn’t a problem as they reached the hatch.

“Do we knock?” Chen grinned.

“We fiddle,” Angela said as she started prodding a keypad set into the frame. Dim illumination in the pad showed it had some life and after a minute of Angela’s attention it lit more positively and a larger pane glowed green. They all felt the groaning of metal on metal as the hatch began to slide back and open.

“Write in your reports that the uncontrolled civilian effected a break-in before you could stop her if it makes you feel better,” Angela beamed at them as she lightly sprung through the opening.

“Just remind yourself the Martians don’t have police, Chen, they don’t get how to behave around us,” Reid grumbled. “And I’ll try not to be too sanctimonious if something happens to her,” she added as the pair hurried after the cavalier archaeologist.

Their helmet-mounted torches danced around the chambers they passed through, picking out in pin-sharp light the pitted, crude concrete surfaces, dusty metal cabinets and machinery housings of a very functional looking space.

“I guessed it wasn’t an underground city, like the Earth refuges,” Reid said drily.

“You sound underwhelmed, Sergeant?” Angela looked back towards her dallying escorts.

“This excites you?” Reid answered with an edge of incredulity.

“This is what I do – the Earth, Moon and Mars have lots of forgotten places – things we lost in the Dark Ages. I wrote my thesis on this type of thing, there’s secrets to be found!” Angela was visibly gleeful. “I’m going to bring a team back to this place, it could be centuries old!”

“In a matter of minutes, it will not exist,” the metallic voice rang through the chamber. “You are advised to leave immediately!”

The Robot hovered there, barring their path and glowing with menace and purpose, its swords drawn. “You lead me here!” Angela shouted.

“And now I must drive you away,” the Robot shot back, raising a sword.

Chen darted in front of Angela, pushing her backwards.

“This thing is pretty handy with those Miss, don’t provoke it,” he cautioned.

She shoved him out of the way and strode forward. A cable near her head sheared with a flash as the sword cut through it and she jumped back. The Robot clashed both blades together in warning, creating more sparks.
A ‘blip’ sounded on a small device fixed to Angela’s gauntlet.

“Portal opening,” she looked up sharply at the hovering threat, with a near-triumphant smile. “You leaving?” she asked it.

It looked at her steadily with its red eye slit as the blackness of the corridor behind it began to glow; orange lightning flared up around the Robot, a jagged ring of energy trailing a warped, polychromatic brightness seemed to snake and pounce upon it like a mouth, biting it out of their reality with an implosion they felt through their environment suits. The suits’ internal alarms for all three of them began to blare as a movement in the space around them bucked the floor and threw them to it. Their headlights caught on rivulets of dust pouring from the ceilings.

“Everybody out NOW!” Reid ordered as the three picked each other up and began to stumble back the way they came – the ceiling falling behind them, rending to pieces the machinery and fittings in its way. Faster and faster they ran – bounced – as they propelled themselves in great leaps until they launched out of the entrance hatch into the glaring, glancing sunlight of the lunar afternoon. Billows of dust and debris spat out from the entrance until the overhang and hillside beyond it simple shivered and collapsed into a new, flatter shape.

“Shut the door for good after him,” Angela frowned and then cursed. “Damn!”

“Into the ship & check your suits,” Reid urged. There was a blast & they could be compromised – anyone feeling faint or cold?”

“It’s the Moon, it’s always bloody cold,” Angela, native of the warm Martian equator complained, but like Reid and Chen, hurriedly made her way back to the Hopper. As she glanced back to the fallen refuge, a click and fizz in her headphone made her pause. “Say again?” she asked.

“Mistress Hypatia was impressed,” came the faint ghost of the Robot’s voice. “She asked me to leave you one more gift.”

***

“Still no idea what it is?”

“None,” said Angela, happily into the linkset in the departure lounge. “My kind of mystery,” she added.

“When are you home?”

“Be a good month, it’s a retrograde transfer orbit at the minute, takes even these Orion-drive ships time,” she answered.
“Oh for a rich friend with a hyperspace yacht or some such,” fantasised the voice in her ear. “Don’t forget what I told you about finding this guy, Glover, on Caldwell before you come down the cable.”
“He’s a ‘finds’ expert?”
“So they tell me, Angela. Picks up all sorts from people passing through the terminus.”
“Well, see if you can find me a hyperspatial engineer as well, for when I’m home,” Angela grinned.
“Didn’t get anything useful?”
“Implosion blew the equipment – got no idea where the Robot went this time – presume this was the idea. All I got was my little friend,” she sighed, holding the small stone statuette in her hands, puzzling over its appearance. She knew it meant something, knew it was another test. “Guess I’ll work it out in time,” she added, scooping up her holdall as her flight was called. “Talk soon, love.”

***

“Who was the archaeologist who led them?” Austin asked with mild interest.
“Martian woman called Angela Elizabeth Landau – know of her?”
“Not heard of her,” Austin shrugged.
“Maybe one to keep an eye on?” the woman with silver-grey hair raised her eyebrows high over her spectacles.
“Maybe the superintendent who sanctioned their little escapade as well – something interesting about an official who doesn’t throw the book at his people for this sort of thing?”
“Because we Moonbase officials are such careful, risk-averse dullards generally?” the woman asked, smirking dangerously.
Austin laughed and said, “Well I wouldn’t give you tuppence for your political master in Moonbase One; bit dodgy he is.”
“He doesn’t like our Superintendent and the feeling is mutual. It’s a situation I’m watching with interest. I’ll keep you posted – ‘night Austin.”
“‘Night Erica,” Austin said, cutting the secure link.
From the one room in Couper Hall he’d made habitable, he looked out at the spring sunshine, lost in thought, before turning back to a notebook and adding Angela’s name to a growing list.

END