TRANSFORMATION, Part III: New Beginnings

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Summary

The Normandy has returned from the galaxy’s edge with Rachaél Shepard’s spirit residing within the ship’s computer. A new captain has been assigned, along with a new mission. Working with the ancient Repository Harbinger, a cloned body for Shepard will be found. Contains some series spoilers. Bioware owns all, except the OC’s, which are imagined by myself, along with a number of asari OC’s ‘borrowed’ from Desert Sunrise.
New Beginnings

“Every beginning has an end and every end is a new beginning.” — Santosh Kalwar, Quote Me

Everyday

♦ SYSTEMS ALLIANCE DOCK CHARLIE-SEVEN, BERTH ZERO-THREE ♦

CITADEL ♦

♦ 0745, FRIDAY, 25 JANUARY, 2188 ♦

Commander Armando Bailey walked up to the Kong Kong’s port side airlock and addressed the Marine standing by the entrance. “Your captain on board, Private?”

“Yes Sir. Do you need to see her?”

“I realize it’s a bit early, but yes, if I could have a few minutes …”

Private Abbott was about to activate his comlink before pausing to say, “My captain is on board, but I need to ask for some clarification, Sir. Do you need to speak with Captain William Cody, or Captain Yuán Xiùlán?”

Puzzlement was apparent on Bailey’s face as he replied, “I need to speak with Captain Cody … is he aboard this vessel, or? …” Bailey’s question trailed off in confusion as understanding dawned on Private Abbott.

“Captain William Cody assumed command of the Normandy at 0001 yesterday morning, Sir,” Abbott replied. “Do you still wish to speak with him? He is currently on Deck Two, packing his personal gear for transfer over to the Normandy.”

Bailey was beginning to grasp what had transpired during the past couple of days. “So, if Cody is now in command of the Normandy, who? …”

Abbott answered his question before Bailey could finish verbalizing it. “Staff Commander Yuán Xiùlán was promoted to Captain and assumed command of this vessel at 0001 yesterday. She is on board as well … I can request that someone escort you down to see her, or … both of them, if you like.”

“Thank you, Private. Comm … er, Captain Yuán will be perfect, actually. She was a lot more involved than Cody in all the crap involving the Blue Suns.”

Abbott grinned in acknowledgement. “Yes Sir, she certainly was.” He touched his ear, activating his comlink. “C-Sec Commander Bailey is here to see Captain Yuán.” He waited for a few moments, then addressed Bailey. “XO Cross will come up to escort you to the Captain’s office, Sir.”

Abbott remained beside the open outer hatch; in less than a minute, Lieutenant Cross entered the short passageway, stepped out onto the dock and offered his hand. “Commander Bailey, it’s a pleasure. I’ll escort you down to see the Captain.”

“I understand Captain Cody is also on board, Lieutenant, packing up to leave the ship.”

“He is” Cross replied. “Captain Yuán is breaking with tradition, choosing to stay on the port side of the ship. Captain’s quarters have always been on the starboard side, but she’s a practical person … doesn’t see the need to move. Easier for all three of us … once Captain Cody has all his gear out, I
can move into his former quarters without having to wait for Captain Yuán to move from port to starboard.”

They walked past the crew mess area and stopped outside Yuán’s quarters. Cross touched the glowing red haptic door lock; the sound of wind chimes could be heard inside, followed by the lock’s color changing to green and an invitation to enter. Cross turned to Bailey as the hatch segments retracted and said, “Good to have you aboard, Sir. Enjoy your visit.”

Bailey thanked him and walked into Captain Yuán’s office and living quarters. Xiùlán stood behind her desk and waved him to a chair as she extended her right hand. “Commander Bailey. What a surprise. Must be serious to bring the head of C-Sec out so early in the morning. She returned to her seat as Bailey sat down across from her. “Can I get you anything? Coffee or tea, or water?”

Bailey thanked her as he declined, then said, “Congratulations, Captain, on your promotion and your new command. I had intended to speak with Captain Cody …”

Yuán grinned as she leaned back in her chair. “Not sure if I should feel insulted or not.” Continuing on, she added, “So, what did you need to talk to Captain Cody about? Anything you can share with me?”

Bailey grimaced. “My apologies, Captain … no offense intended. It’s just that Cody was the first one that involved me in these Blue Suns attacks. I know you were involved in rescuing Miranda Lawson from her captivity on Earth.” Bailey smiled. “Seems you were also involved in every attack made on Ms Lawson since then.”

Yuán chuckled and responded, “Miranda as much as blamed me for all the attacks directed at her since her rescue from those bastards.” Xiùlán leaned forward, arms crossed on her desk. “Thing is, their attempts at kidnapping or killing her haven’t been repeated since we captured their ringleader and put him in irons.”

Bailey smile was grim. “That’s why I’m here, Captain. I would like to talk to the creepy little dirt bag that took a shot at you. I know he was actually aiming for Ms Lawson … you had the misfortune of standing in the way.”

“Joesiar?” Yuán said the name and made a face, as if it left a foul stench and taste in her nose and mouth. “You want to talk to Joesiar?”

“Can you get me in to see him, Captain? I’d like to talk to him about a room filled with explosives … a compartment inside an InNetCo warehouse that is … or was … a front for Suns activity in Delta Ward. It was the destination originally programmed into your shuttlecraft’s navi-computer when you accompanied Ms Lawson from the Hong Kong … you had to reprogram Huerta Memorial as the new destination.”

Xiùlán finished her tea and asked, “What happened at this warehouse, Commander?”

“Remote detonation, by someone watching a vid-monitor nearby. A number of my squad was severely injured in that explosion … some of them didn’t survive the ensuing 36 hours.” Bailey paused as he thought about that day. “I want to find out if this … Joesiar … had anything to do with that explosion, Captain. As head of C-Sec I need to add my own charges to those the Alliance is bringing concerning the attempts on Miranda Lawson and …,” Bailey paused as he looked directly at Xiùlán, “ …you, Captain Yuán.”

“Commander, you may be in luck. I believe it would be in our best interests if you did go see the cán [慘 – awful] … ah, that is, the alleged perpetrator. He might even be willing to talk to you if I
can persuade a certain party to accompany you.”

Bailey’s expression flashed surprise for an instant, causing Xiülán to smile as he asked, “Who’d you have in mind?”

“Joesiar doesn’t have an advocate … he’s been kept under wraps since his arrest. I’d like to have Major Kaidan Alenko accompany you. Joesiar is a craven little coward. Having a Council Spectre at your side just might be enough to loosen his tongue. I know you’re aware Spectre’s don’t have their hands tied by rules and regulations … Joesiar’s facing charges of terrorism, tampering with and destruction of Alliance property, assault with intent to commit grievous injuries and multiple charges of attempted murder.”

Xiülán poured herself some more tea as she continued, “He might manage to skate on one or two of those, but I’m the main witness against him for the attempted murder charges.” She paused as she contemplated punishments meted out for various criminal activities. “It sometimes seems a shame that humanity eliminated the death penalty as a possible sentence for kidnapping, rape and murder. The ancient Chinese legal system is rife with tales of torture to extract confessions from miscreants. I expect batarian practices of justice these days may be similar—maybe even worse—but Joesiar had batarians working for him and with him, so I expect he might fare alright in a batarian court of law, if there even is such a thing.” She grinned as she asked, “Do you know if any of his transgressions were against the Hegemony?”

Bailey smiled as he replied, “I don’t know Ma’am, and there’s no batarian embassy on the Citadel. It’d be nice to be able to ask them if they have any grievances against him.”

Yuán chuckled at the thought of a mob of batarians standing outside Joesiar’s cell, waving torches and pitchforks and hollering for his head.

“I’ll ask Alenko to meet you at your office tomorrow, set up a meeting for you the day after. That work okay for you?”

Bailey stood and offered his hand; Yuán stood up as well. Taking her hand, he said, “Thank you, Captain Yuán. Having Spectre Alenko along just may prove useful in persuading Joesiar to talk.”

“Good luck, Commander,” Yuán replied. “I hope you get some positive results.”

♦ ALLIANCE CRUISER SSV SHANGHAI, HIGH EARTH ORBIT · SOL SYSTEM ♦
♦ FRIDAY EVENING, 25 JANUARY, 2188 ♦

Captain Reuben Warner propped both feet on his desk and leaned back in his chair as he read through the orders he’d just received from Admiral Hackett. Captain Bill Cody was as good as his word – he’d promptly talked to the ‘old man’ about transferring Gunnery Chief Sandra Patton to the Normandy, and Hackett had sent the authorization and proposed promotion to him on the Shanghai every bit as promptly.

Warner had just read through the text a second time when a chime sounded at his door. Keying the lock, he asked his visitor to come in as he stood to greet her.

Sandra Patton walked into her captain’s office and came to attention in front of his desk. “Gunnery Chief Patton reporting as ordered, Sir.”

Warner replied, “Stand easy, Chief.” Waving to one of the chairs in front of the desk he continued, “Take a seat … I have something here that requires your attention,” as he returned to his own chair.
“I’ve received a transfer request for you, Gunnery Chief.” Warner handed her a datapad containing the information he had received from Cody yesterday, along with the promotion offer guaranteed by Admiral Hackett. “You made an impression on an old mercenary when you were groundside in London … Zaeed Massani? Well, he currently has a berth on the Normandy and spoke to the new CO on your behalf. Seems they have need of an NCO with your qualifications. Interested?”

Patton quickly glanced through the text contained on the datapad—just several lines outlining a transfer to the SSV Normandy as a … “Is this for real, Captain?” She could hardly believe her eyes as she took a closer look at the datapad. ‘Promotion to Master Gunnery Sergeant … position as Chief of the SSV Normandy’s Weapons Systems Division’. She looked back at Captain Warner. She knew him as a ‘no bullshit’ kind of man; she also knew he treated everyone … everyone … on the Shanghai with the same sort of respect he demanded in return.

“It’s for real, Ms Patton. As you can see, the promotion actually skips a rank; Admiral Hackett himself has signed off on this, but it’s contingent on you agreeing to transfer to the Normandy.”

“I don’t know what to say, Captain. I haven’t requested …”

Warner held up his hand to stop her. “I know that, Gunny. This offer came totally out of deep space, believe me, and if it didn’t have that skip rank promotion tied to it, you wouldn’t be sitting in that chair; being offered a skip rank promo is a golden opportunity for you to advance on up the NCO ladder, Ms Patton.” He pointed at the datapad she was holding. “The Normandy needs a Master Gunnery Sergeant; you are more than qualified for the position, and that promotion offer is simply icing on the cake!”

Patton brought a hand up to her mouth to cover an ear-to-ear grin. It took a bit of mental effort to regain her professional mask. Removing her hand to speak, she haltingly asked, “When … when would this transfer … take place, Sir?”

Warner smiled. “A shuttle from the Normandy will be here in a few hours or so, after it makes a stop at Alliance HQ West, so you can get your gear packed and ready.”

“You already told them ‘yes’? How did you know I’d …”

“ …accept the offer? You’re a smart person, Gunny … you wouldn’t still be on this ship if you weren’t, just like it wouldn’t make sense for you to turn this offer down. Besides, I’m told this shuttle’s flight serves a secondary purpose. Couldn’t get the details out of Cody … er, Captain Cody, your new CO. I do know you will do quite well under his command, Ms Patton. He just relinquished command of the Hong Kong to his XO, and there was never any negative comments heard or complaints filed during his tenure there.”

Patton stood up, still not quite believing her good fortune. Warner stood as well and offered his hand across the desk. As she reached out to take it, he said, “The Shanghai will undoubtedly get by without you, Sandra, but I’ll surely play hell trying to fill your position here.”

“Cassie …um, Cassandra Marissa Harper, Sir,” she replied. “Corporal, in my company. She has a good head on her shoulders. She should be considered for promotion to Sergeant; she has the required time and training. Then someone a bit further up the chain could go into my old slot.” She released his hand, and as she turned to leave said, “Thank you, Captain, for everything. I’ve really enjoyed working on the Shanghai.”

“You’re welcome, Gunnery Chief. Oh, and if you truly believe Ms Harper has what it takes to make a good sergeant, send the particulars to me through the Shanghai’s Extranet account … having the recommendation in writing will make it that much easier for me to make it happen for her. Hell, the
work everyone’s been doing outside? I think we should all get a month’s paid leave, somewhere nice, if such a place still exists. Good luck, Gunny … and fly safe.”

♦ CHARON RELAY · 2350 HOURS ♦

The UT-47a from the Orizaba appeared in the distance, a white point of light wreathed in shifting blue waves of energy that rapidly grew in size as it approached, then just as rapidly decelerated to sub-light velocity upon coming abreast of the enormous containment rings, which also slowed their rotation back to their normal stand-by speed of twenty revolutions a minute.

Lieutenant Sherri Morse’s transfer to the Normandy wouldn’t be final for another day; she had said ‘yes’ when Lieutenant Commander Cortez had asked her if she was really interested, and her captain on the Orizaba hadn’t objected. As she was technically ‘between’ assignments (though no member of the Alliance military was ever ‘between’ assignments), she had been tasked with going to the local cluster to retrieve another transfer, this one from the SSV Shanghai. Hong Kong Captain Yuán Xiùlán had also requested she deliver a package to a general on Earth, which would be her first stop. She entered coordinates into the navi-computer and initiated the in-system jump towards the third planet from the sun. Glancing at her companion in the co-pilot’s seat, she asked, “How’re you doing, Ms Coré? Any problems?”

Edi turned her gaze to the Lieutenant and replied, “It is curious. I can feel the absence of the Normandy, as if there is a … hole … in my mind. I do not believe it affects my abilities, but I will continue to run diagnostics as we get closer to our destination.”

Morse looked at Edi with some concern. “We’re about two and a half hours or so from landing in Vancouver. I asked Commander Cortez to keep an eye on Shepard, just to make sure she’s able to maintain her own stability without you on board.”

Lieutenant Morse had spent the previous day aboard the Normandy being read-in to everything concerning Edi and the ship’s computer, along with Commander Shepard’s history on the Normandy SR-1, beginning with that ship’s destruction and her death at the hands of the Collectors, then her subsequent rebuild and tenure with Cerberus. Her history fighting the Reapers as Commander of the confiscated and reconfigured Normandy SR-2 was less of a mystery than was her time spent with Cerberus.

Actually meeting the commander had been a real treat for Morse; she had been pleasantly surprised —after hearing all the horror stories—at just how friendly and welcoming Shepard had been. And having served on a dreadnaught for so long, she was astonished at the amount of space available inside the Normandy; after her first conversation with LC Cortez, she had pictured the ship in her mind as not having much more interior volume than the shuttle she was currently flying.

Keying the comm system to the secure channel for Alliance HQ, she made her first call to its adjacent airfield. “Alliance control, Orizaba shuttlecraft zero-charlie-one, requesting an approach vector for landing.”

The reply came back almost instantly. “Shuttle charlie-one, Alliance control. Your flight is not listed. Please state the nature of your business.”

“Alliance control, Charlie-one – delivering a package from Hong Kong Captain Yuán Xiùlán to General RaeLee Park.”

“Charlie-one, Alliance Control – squawk four-six-two-eight-two, ident and standby.”
Morse repeated the instruction back word for word; after resetting her transponder and pressing the identification control, she leaned back in her seat just a bit so she could talk with Edi as she waited for clearance and an approach vector.

After ten minutes, the comms came alive with, “Shuttle Charlie-one, Alliance control. Your operation has been verified … transmitting your approach vector and landing clearance. No further communication is required until your five-minute out checkpoint.”

“Control, Charlie-one … acknowledged and thanks.” Sherri slaved the shuttle’s navi-computer to the signal being transmitted from the Alliance field; she felt a slight shudder through the deck as the signal synched up with her previous navigational input.

She could now sit back and let the computers fly them down to the field – she only needed to monitor their progress for the rest of the flight and take over at the last minute or so to actually set down on the flight line.

Once there, the Navy lieutenant and Marine sergeant seated in the crew compartment would deliver the special package—a titanium case secured with diplomatic seals and marked TOP SECRET—to General Park.

Afterwards, Morse would fly back into high Earth orbit to rendezvous with the cruiser Shanghai, where she would be picking up a gunnery sergeant being transferred to the Normandy. She also had a gift of Bushmills 21 single malt for Shanghai captain Rueben Warner … Captain Cody’s way of offering his personal thanks for allowing him to ‘poach’ the gunnery sergeant from Warner’s ship.

♦ EARLY SATURDAY MORNING, 26 JANUARY, 2188 ♦

Flight Lieutenant Jeff ‘Joker’ Moreau was not happy; he was lying on a Med-bay gurney, dressed in little more than a flimsy piece of gauze, open at the sides and held in place with cloth ties. True, he was here by his own choice, but thinking of that only served to intensify his acerbic mood.

Dr Karin Chakwas was going to perform a bone-weave surgery on the brittle-boned pilot, similar to what she had done for Commander Shepard before … well, before her confinement in BC. The nanites circulating throughout Jeff’s body as a result of Shepard’s choice to end the war had done a remarkable job of lessening the severity of the Vrolik syndrome that had afflicted him since birth. Dr Chakwas had assured him this procedure would significantly lessen the breakage of even the tiny bones in his feet when he walked, along with lessening the disease’s impact on his everyday life.

Joker had had a serious discussion with his new CO, Captain Bill Cody, before agreeing to undergo the procedure; he didn’t want his required medical leave to keep him ashore when the Normandy left to hunt the Blue Suns. Cody had assured the usually snarky pilot that the Normandy would not be the same ship without him occupying the pilot’s seat. “Get the procedure done, Flight Lieutenant,” Cody stated. “Your leave and convalescence will be complete before the Normandy is ready to fly again; trust me, once we’re back in space, it’ll be a long time before you have to perform another docking maneuver.” Even Commander Shepard had encouraged him to have the procedure done.

He was thinking about Cody’s words when Karin entered the room. “How are we doing this morning, Flight Lieutenant?”

Ignoring her use of the plural pronoun, he answered, “Ready for this to be over so I can wear real clothing again, Ma’am.”

“Well, we’re ready for you in the surgical suite, so I thought I’d come down before I get sterile and
see how you’re doing.”

Joker sighed. “I wish Edi was going to be here when you get done with me.”

Karin’s reply was sympathetic. “She should be back from her trip to the Sol system by the time you wake up. Surgery will take about five hours, recovery another 90 minutes to two hours. I cannot imagine her being gone any longer than that.” Placing a comforting hand on his shoulder, she smiled and asked, “So, ready to get this done?”

Joker sighed again; normally, he’d have had a snappy comeback, but the only thing he could think of to say was, “No, but let’s get this done anyway, before I embarrass myself by getting up and hobbling out of here in this flimsy excuse of a nightgown.”

Karin looked behind her and signaled the two orderlies that had been patiently waiting out of sight beside the door to the room. Turning back to Joker, she said quietly, “You’ll be fine, Jeff.”

♦ ALLIANCE CRUISER SSV SHANGHAI, HIGH EARTH ORBIT · SOL SYSTEM ♦

Corporal Cassie Harper had just finished her shift outside; working with a sergeant, she was in charge of a group of eight servicemen at work on the recovery of bodies and body parts scattered in space above the scorched, partially destroyed shell of planet Earth. She had gathered her bathing supplies and, much like Gunnery Chief Patton had done a few days ago, Cassie headed towards the women’s showers to get cleaned up.

She knew … really knew … she did not smell ‘bad’, other than the normal scents of sweat mixed with deodorant, body wash and shampoo; but she was absolutely convinced that, after ten hours of working in a suit outside, the stench of death clung to her like a shroud inside, and no amount of body wash or deodorant or shampoo, no amount of scrubbing, would ever eradicate the bouquet of decay she felt permeated every piece of wreckage, every body part, (including internal organs) every splash of solidified blood floating about outside the ships’ hull. She knew, but she wasn’t convinced. She had to bathe.

She turned a corner in the passageway and nearly ran into her friend, Gunnery Chief Patton. “ Damn, Gunny, I’m sorry! Guess I’m lost wandering around in my thoughts. How’s it going?”

“Actually, we need to talk, Corporal. You heading for the showers?”

“What gave me away? The look of anticipation? The armload of …,” Cassie had an entire line of snarky comebacks ready for just such an encounter.

“Stow it, Cassie. Walk with me … I have something I need to tell you.”

Harper stared at her friend for a moment before nodding. “ Sure, Sandee. Come on … I only have a short time to get this done, just like you.” Cassie began walking again as she asked, “What’s up?”

Patton wasn’t about to beat around the bush with her friend. “ I’ve been transferred off the Shanghai, Cass. Captain just gave me the official word.” Patton looked away and hung her head, thinking that Cassie might feel she was being abandoned, which Patton knew was not true. She waited nervously for Cassie’s reaction.

Cassie stopped and turned to face Patton. “ Just like that? You’re leaving?”

“I’m so sorry, Cass. It’s not something I was looking to do. The offer came from … ahh … a Captain William Cody! It was even endorsed by the Admiral.” Patton was still having trouble
believing this was happening to her, so wasn’t surprised by her friend’s response.

“Admiral Hackett? Admiral Hackett is part of this? What the hell, Sandee?”

“I know, right? Here, take a look.” Patton offered the datapad she’d been carrying, her orders and promise of promotion plain on the screen. Cassie traded her bath supplies for the datapad and read Patton’s orders.

“My god, Sandee! You’re gonna be a Master Gunnery Sergeant!? And Chief … of the SSV Normandy’s Weapons Systems Division!? Sonovabitch, Sandee, that is really extraordinary! And … that’s a skip-rank promo! I’m so happy for you!” Cassie flung an arm around Sandra, hugging her tightly. Letting go and stepping back, she handed Patton’s datapad back as she retrieved her bath supplies. “So, when do you have to leave?”

“In a few hours. A shuttle from the Orizaba is coming for me, soon as it gets done dropping a package at BC/HQ.”

Sandra felt bad immediately as Cassie’s face fell. “So, no ‘going away’ party?”

“’fraid not, Cassie. But, I did make a recommendation to Captain Warner.” Harper looked back up at her friend. “I gave him your name and rank, told him he should promote you to sergeant.” Patton paused, then added, “Don’t know how much good it’ll do, but I’m going to put the recommendation in writing, forward it to ‘im. You’ve earned a promotion, Cass, more so than me. The recommendation to the new CO of the Normandy came from a civilian on board. I’ve certainly done nothing …”

“ … but your damned job, Gunny!” Cassie interrupted. “Don’t you dare be shy! You deserve the higher grade. Hell, we all should be getting hardship pay and extra leave for having to do what we’re doing, and now I’ve said that out loud, I feel really bad for surviving.” Cassie looked at the stuff in her arms. “Look, I have to get cleaned up, get a bite to eat. I’ll make sure to be in the hanger bay when you ride shows up, okay?”

Cassie started to go, then turned and added, “And Sandee? … Thanks. I really appreciate you putting a word in for me. Means a lot to know … well, you know …” With that, she turned and entered the women’s shower, leaving Patton to go to her quarters to begin packing.

♦ CITY of VANCOUVER, BC · WESTERN NORTH AMERICA · 0335 HOURS ♦

“Shuttlecraft zero-charlie-one, Alliance control. This is your five-minute out warning prior to landing. Approach vector is locked. Parking location has been transmitted to your Nav-Comm. Prepare to resume manual control over the northern field boundary. Welcome back to Earth, Charlie-one.”

Lieutenant Morse responded by repeating the instructions back word for word, then finished with, “Charlie-one … acknowledged and thanks.”

Sherri began her pre-landing checklist as the shuttle continued to descend towards the field, banking gently in a wide turn over the Fraser River delta.

She completed the checklist as the navi-computer began an audible thirty-second countdown to the one-minute-from-touchdown mark. She released the guidance system and took manual control as the decelerating UT-47 crossed the Northern field boundary at 15 meters altitude; Morse turned into the parking pattern and headed for her parking location, already plotted on her HUD. Drawing abreast
of a row of shuttles already on the ground, she arrested her forward motion with deft applications of reverse thrust as she slowly increased the apparent mass of her craft, causing it to descend towards the parking spot, delineated by small lights along the painted lines forming the rectangular box on the tarmac. She continued to decrease the field charge to the mass effect core until, at a hovering altitude of 15 Cm, she cut the power to the belly mounted thrusters, dropping the UT-47 to the pavement with a slight jolt.

Before securing her flight controls, she quickly entered coordinates for her departure from the base, knowing her next stop would be the hanger bay of the SSV Shanghai. Thinking she would be leaving in less than thirty minutes, she kept the core ‘hot’ so she could get back in the air quickly, then stood and stretched, smiled at Edi and moved around the bulkhead to the crew compartment, where she punched the door control and said, “Gentlemen, we’re here.” Lieutenant Morse felt the cool dampness of a Vancouver afternoon through her flight uniform as she stepped out of the shuttle.

The Navy lieutenant and Marine sergeant stood as one, with the lieutenant carrying the sealed case for General Park. Each nodded wordlessly to Morse as they stepped out of the shuttle, followed by Edi, who stopped beside Sherri as the two men walked purposefully towards the operations building at the end of the line of parked shuttles.

“Lieutenant Morse,” Edi said quietly as she looked at the men walking away from them. “I believe that Lieutenant is a member of the Blue Suns.”

Sherri looked at Edi, doubt plain in her expression. “What makes you think anyone from the Blue Suns could be an Alliance Lieutenant, Ms Coré? That pair is from the JAG office on the Citadel. I can’t imagine anyone being assigned there that hasn’t been vetted all the way back to the womb!”

“The tattoo on his neck – it has been removed; the collar of his SDU partially hides the scarring left behind by the removal process, but it is certainly recognizable.”

Morse leapt back into the shuttle without a word; Edi quickly followed, where she closed and sealed the hatch as Sherri opened a channel to the airfield supervisor. “Alliance control, Shuttle zero-charlie-one, please respond.”

“Alliance control, Shuttle zero-charlie-one, please respond.”

“Control, I believe there is an intruder, an imposter, inside the building – possibly Blue Suns, dressed as a Navy Lieutenant – he’s accompanied by a Marine Sergeant. They are supposed to be delivering a sealed diplomatic case to General RaeLee Park. Case may contain a weapon or explosive device. Please intercept and detain.”

“Acknowledged, Charlie-one … standby.”

Edi sat next to Lieutenant Morse and logged herself into the shuttle’s computer. “Ms Coré, what the …”

Edi looked at Sherri as she continued to enter commands on the haptic interface. “I am sending a warning directly to General Park’s personal extranet account. Her terminal will sound a unique alarm to warn her of the imposter, or imposters. The General is directly involved in the upcoming prosecution of Jason Joesiar, the human that held Miranda Lawson in captivity and made several attempts to murder her and Captain Yuán after the then-staff commander rescued her from this very city.”

Edi finished sending her warning, then stood and moved back to the crew compartment, where she methodically inspected all the seats, storage compartments, deckplates and overhead, her vision
enhanced by her tinted visor. Morse had followed Edi and waited as the bio/mechanical woman finished her inspection. “It does not appear the shuttle has been sabotaged inside. I should inspect outside.”

“I’m coming with you,” Sherri replied.

“No,” came Edi’s firm response. “You will need to seal yourself inside and wait. I will conduct the inspection, and I may need you to hover the shuttle high enough for me to thoroughly inspect the underside.” Edi opened a locker and withdrew an M-5 Phalanx. Checking to make sure it had a full heat-sink, she grabbed a couple of extras and added, “You should also monitor the comm system for any news from Alliance Control.”

“Edi, you’re a civilian, a contractor for the Alliance. I need you to …”

“Please, Lieutenant … I fought beside Commander Shepard, Garrus Vakarian and Liara T’Soni during the Reaper War. The majority of the enemy forces we faced were humans – Cerberus engineered soldiers. I can recall each kill I made. I got this.”

Morse gave Edi a resigned look. “Okay, but I want you to keep an open comlink at all times, understand. We didn’t come her looking for a fight – neither of us is armored up.”

“This platform has certain … advantages … over a purely organic body, Lieutenant.” Edi stepped out of the shuttle and closed the hatch. “I’ll be fine.”

Morse activated the virtual windscreen as she returned to the pilot’s seat. The view allowed her to watch the route taken by the Marine sergeant and Navy Lieutenant, just in case they eluded capture and returned to the flight line. “Sitrep, Ms Coré.”

“Almost finished inspecting the aft thrusters, Lieutenant. Please standby.”

Sherri called the airfield supervisor again. “Control, Zero-charlie-one. Do you have a Sitrep for me?” She waited for a twenty-count before trying again. “Alliance control, Shuttle zero-charlie-one. Please respond.” After another twenty seconds without a response, Morse shifted to a low-frequency emergency channel and repeated her query with the same lack of a response. “Edi, something is very wrong. I’m not getting any reply from the field supervisor, even on an emergency channel. How are you doing?”

“I have discovered an object jammed in the pivot point of the aft starboard thruster module,” came the reply. “Attempting to dislodge it now.”

Edi braced her shoulder against one of the heatsink vanes protruding from the aft end of the crew compartment, grabbed the object with both hands and pulled. It was jammed between the thruster’s shell and the body of the shuttle. Working it slightly up and down as she pulled, it finally came loose. Moving away from the shuttle’s aft end, Edi inspected her prize and quickly discovered it was an explosive device. She threw it as hard as she could towards the empty ‘approach’ area north of the field; she watched and waited as it landed with a bounce, then rolled several times before coming to a stop. Edi pulled the M-5 from her hip, selected the ‘incendiary’ mod and sighted in on the package. One shot was all she needed to cause an explosion seemingly out of proportion to its size.

Morse came over her comm, anxiety coloring her voice. “Edi! What the hell was that?”

“The device I dislodged from the thruster pivot would have severely damaged the shuttle, possibly even breached the hull. I caused it to detonate harmlessly on an empty part of the field.” Edi paused as she cocked her head towards the operations center. “Lieutenant Morse, I believe I have
detected the sounds of weapons fire coming from the field operations center. I am returning to the shuttle.”

Morse unlatched and opened the hatch for Edi; retaking her seat up front, she saw movement at the far end of the line of parked shuttles.

“Edi, I need you to activate the cannons. Be ready to target and fire on my command … I’m putting this bird back in the air.” Without waiting for Edi to answer, she quickly dropped the shuttle’s apparent mass as she fired the ventral thrusters, launching them straight up to a hover six meters above the pavement. With fore and aft thrusters firing intermittently to keep the shuttle relatively stationary, Sherri glanced at Edi, noting with satisfaction she had the cannons warmed up and ready to fire.

The comm system came to life with, “Zero-charlie-one, Alliance control.” Edi held her hand up, indicating Sherri should not answer that call.

“That is a different voice, Lieutenant. Ask them for today’s security code.”

Sherri opened the comm system and replied, “Alliance control, Zero-charlie-one. We have detected the sounds of weapons fire coming from your location. Please provide today’s security code.”

“Charlie-one, Control … ahhh, the code is three-delta-niner-sierra x-ray.”

Sherri looked at Edi and shook her head once from side-to-side as she said, “Edi, bring up our shields, now!” Pivoting the aft thrusters and applying emergency power for a maximum rate of ascent, she responded, “Acknowledged, Control. We’ll be back shortly.” As Edi complied with Morse’s request she asked, “Where are we going, Lieutenant?

The new voice from Alliance Control came over the comm before Morse could answer. “Charlie-one, Alliance Control, you are ordered to return to the field. This is your only warning before we open fire.”

“Dammit, Edi, we have to get some help! … Wait, what are you doing?”

Edi had started entering commands into one of the Kodiak’s interfaces as Sherri began jigging the shuttle to prevent the ground-based defenses from obtaining a weapons lock. “Your maneuvers are unnecessary as of …” Edi entered the final command. “…right now, Lieutenant. I have disabled their auto-targeting protocols.” Tilting her head slightly, she continued, “May I suggest you contact the Shanghai … request they send a couple of Marine squads down to retake that field.”

“Good thinking!” She grinned as she contacted the ship orbiting above them and added, “Are you sure you shouldn’t have received a commission from Admiral Hackett?”

Edi smiled enigmatically. “I don’t believe that would be in the best interests of the Alliance or me, Lieutenant. As you have previously stated, I am a civilian, a contractor for the Alliance. I have a … freedom … that you do not possess. I will only act in the best interests of the Systems Alliance and of my friends on the Normandy. Wearing a uniform, being bound by more rules and regulations, would not improve my performance. It would only hinder me.”

Sherri nodded in understanding as she touched her ear. “I have confirmation from the Shanghai … reinforcements are on the way, ETA two minutes.” She set the shuttle to ‘orbit’ at one and a half klicks above the field so they could quickly descend to see how the op played out.

The ‘two minutes’ seemed to take forever, but the ETA provided to Sherri proved to be accurate as Edi confirmed rapid approach of two A-61 Mantis Gunships from the Shanghai; the pair screamed
past them on their way to the field below. Sherri followed them at a slower pace, coming to a hover twelve meters above the line of parked shuttles as the Marine squads from the *Shanghai* deployed from the gunships.

It was a treat for both of them to witness the precision with which the ground teams worked their way into the complex; as they moved, the A-61’s took positions above and to each side to provide tactical cover with their heavy weaponry. The operation was over almost before it began … the Marines quickly took control of the entire complex, taking down the two intruders and their twelve inside confederates; all were marched out of the main building, chained together with their hands bound behind them.

Sherri set the shuttle down near one of the two squads as the gunships landed twenty or so meters away. A Marine Sergeant met them at the hatch as Edi opened it from within, allowing Lieutenant Morse to step out. “Nice work, Sergeant. Any casualties inside?”

The sergeant gave Morse a sketchy salute as he answered, “A few injuries, Ma’am. Nothing serious and no casualties. They had a number of weapons in that case the fake lieutenant was carrying.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Your warning to General Park probably saved the day. She was able to quietly spread the word without alerting our bad guys. How’d you tip her off?”

“Private channel,” Sherri responded. “They were supposed to be delivering depositions in the sealed diplomatic case. Guess they thought it would be a good way to smuggle in weapons so they could take the general out. I’m happy those guys didn’t come from the *Orizaba*. The admiral does not like being blindsided … it’s good you arrived so quickly.”

The sergeant grinned. “Someone’s ass’ll be spinnin’ in the wind over this. I’m just glad it won’t be mine!” He stepped back, saluted Sherri again and left to rejoin his squad.

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**A/N: Welcome to the first chapter of the continuation of Transformation.** As I said at the end of Chapter 51, there are a lot of loose ends that need to be tied. The crews of the *Normandy* and the *Hong Kong II* will be working together to take down the Blue Suns wherever that are discovered to be operating, and to find, with the help of Harbinger and Žiuk’Durmah, a Cerberus engineered cloned body for Commander Shepard, currently a disembodied presence in the *Normandy*’s computer core. And we need to check in with our favorite turian and asari, currently approaching a Cerberus facility in the Anadius System. Constructive criticism is welcome, along with Favs, follows and reviews.
You do not win a war by dying for your country. You win a war by making sure that some poor bastard dies for his. – Mal Peet, Tamar

SSV ORIZABA · OFFICE OF FLEET ADMIRAL STEVEN HACKETT

Hackett leaned back in his chair and sighed, sounding tired beyond belief. “How in the hell did this happen, Captain? I know Lieutenant Morse used a shuttle from this ship … did those two … traitors … also come from this ship, or were they assigned by Alliance Command on the Citadel?”

“Morse flew the shuttle to the spaceport and landed near the HKII. The Navy Lieutenant and Marine Sergeant boarded from off-ship,” Captain Everett replied. Thinking back, he added, “The transfer case for General Park would have been given to an authorized envoy. If a pair of imposters intercepted them, the legitimate case probably would have been tossed … substituted with a look-alike.”

Hackett stood up and looked Captain Everett straight in the eye. “Those people were not assigned to a ship here, were they? Perhaps we need to send a search party out, see if we can find the two people that were supposed to be on that shuttle. They’re probably lying dead somewhere along the route they had to walk to get to the docks, and the case they were carrying is long gone. Contact Yuán on the Hong Kong and Cody on the Normandy. They need to know what’s going on, especially since the Blue Suns seem to be involved.”

“I’ll see to it at once, Sir. Is that all?”

“Dismissed, Captain.” Hackett returned to his chair and started shuffling reports.

Everett saluted as he said in a somber tone, “Yes Sir,” and left.

SATURDAY, 26 JANUARY, 2188 · 0555 HOURS

Capatin Yuán hurriedly left her office and headed for the CIC. Encountering Bill Cody in the mess area, she paused long enough to ask if he had also heard from Hackett’s flagship.

“Haven’t heard a thing, Captain,” Cody smiled.

Xiülán blushed slightly at his emphasis of her fresh title and thought, ‘Wonder how long until the ‘new’ wears off these bars …’ as she replied, “Appears the Blue Suns managed to get a pair of agents aboard the Orizaba’s shuttle to Earth … bastards were going after General Park … plus there were twelve sleeper agents inside the facility at the Vancouver Base. Might have succeeded in eliminating her, except Edi spotted the burned-off tattoo on one of them as they left the shuttle in Vancouver.” Xiülán shook her head in frustration. “I am totally beyond tired of dealing with these bastards, Bill. It seems like they’re popping up every time we turn around. What’s really disturbing is how they got the weapons into the facility.”

Cody’s brow knit in concern. “Any of our people hurt down there?”

“A few injuries, all minor … no deaths, thankfully. I’ll need to talk to Sherri … ah, Lieutenant
Morse, and Edi … when they return, but the info I have says Edi was the one that alerted General Park through a private emergency channel, after which she hacked the airfield defense system’s auto-targeting protocols so Morse could get the shuttle airborne and call in some heavy duty help from the Shanghai.”

Cody grinned at the info regarding Edi. “I’m beginning to think our Ms Coré should have been given a chief petty officer’s position in the Alliance. Our prejudice concerning AI’s is going to really work against us in the long run.”

“That bias is pretty ingrained, Captain, but from everything I’ve read about the Normandy during its trip back from the edge, I have a feeling Edi would not do anything to hurt the Normandy or any of its crew, or any human … even a member of the Blue Suns.”

“Possibly … but she saw a helluva lot of action during the war … killed a lot of Cerberus soldiers during that time.” Cody paused as he looked at the bulkhead mounted chronometer. “I have to get back to it, Xiùlán. Trying to get my quarters cleaned out so Cross can move in.”

Xiùlán had the good sense not to smirk as she asked, “How’s that going for you?”

“Much too slow,” came the instant answer. “Some advice for you … don’t stay too long on any one vessel, Xiùlán. The longer you stay, the more stuff you accumulate.”

“Hell, I’ll have Cross assign a couple of people to assist you,” Xiùlán replied. “The sooner everything is done, the sooner you and I can get out of this system and go hunting! I’m heading up to the CIC … I’ll send him down to see you.”

Cody chuckled. “I already sent him away once. Poor guy isn’t gonna know which way to jump with both of us on his ass.”

“I’ll have him round up a couple of crewmen to help you. Sooner you’re cleared out, sooner he can move in.” Xiùlán’s sincere smile removed whatever sting the words might have seemed to possess.

Cody sighed, then turned and headed back towards his former office, saying over his shoulder, “Don’t suppose I can argue with that logic. You know where I’ll be …”

Xiùlán walked around the elevator supports and went up the semi-circular staircase to the CIC at the rear of Deck One; she was pleased to see Lieutenant Cross and Miranda Lawson as she entered the area. “Lieutenant, there’s some BS trouble in Vancouver. I need you to send a squad of our Marines to the JAG offices here … see if they can find any signs of a struggle or fight along the most probable route two men from there would have taken to arrive at the docks here.”

Cross said, “On it, Ma’am.” He turned to leave, only to have Xiùlán add, “Have them search for a diplomatic carry-case along that route. We think our people were jumped and the case they were carrying may have simply been tossed aside.” Xiùlán paused for a moment, then finished with, “Oh, and I also need you to assign a couple of crewmen to assist Captain Cody with getting his gear packed up so it can be delivered to the Normandy.”

Cross acknowledged her instructions, pausing a moment before he headed for the stairwell. He was glad Yuán had intervened and was going to get Cody assistance in getting his stuff moved, and he doubted that anyone would object to the assignment.

Xiùlán continued to think about the problems in Vancouver as she put in a call to Major Kaidan Alenko. She was especially perturbed that a diplomatic case had been used to smuggle weapons into a secure Alliance facility in Vancouver. If the Hong Kong’s Marines failed to locate the missing
case, she’d have to request duplicate deposition copies be shipped from the JAG office, which would involve another flight to the Sol System. The Blue Suns were starting to seriously piss her off.

♦ OFFICER’S ROW, ALLIANCE SHORE HOUSING · CITADEL ♦

His morning shower interrupted, Major Kaidan Alenko answered the chiming comms system interface after wrapping himself in a bath towel. Keying on audio only, the annoyance at being disturbed during what was supposed to be his personal time came through as he answered, “Alenko.”

He had not been expecting a feminine voice to reply. “Good morning, Major. My apologies for calling so early in the morning, especially during your personal leave.”

‘Dammit! … What the hell does Xiùlán need?’ Kaidan thought as he replied, “Must be important, Captain, or you wouldn’t be interrupting my morning shower. What may I do for you?”

Xiùlán mentally noted the subtle emphasis of her title as she smoothly replied, “It’s important to all of us, Major. I need a favor … can you meet me on the Hong Kong?”

“Okay … what kind of bad news are you going to give me? Perhaps I can save myself the walk to the docks.”

Xiùlán feigned innocence as she started to reply, “Why Major, what makesss …”

“ … Captain Yuán,” Kaidan interrupted, “you wouldn’t be calling me at 0645 if there wasn’t some bad news or some sort of crap assignment you want to either include me in or dump me into. Either way, it’ll be bad news for me, so …”

Xiùlán chuckled, cleared her throat and replied, “Major, I really need to talk to you face-to-face. Can you to meet me on the ship by … say … 0815? Will that be enough time for you to finish your bath, get dressed and walk down here from officer’s row?”

It was Alenko’s turn to chuckle. “Life in the military has really ruined us … you know that, don’t you!? Our actions, our routines, hell, every event in our lives is so … predictable. You don’t find it surprising your call interrupted my bath time, I don’t find it surprising you have some crap assignment for which you hope you can persuade me to volunteer.” Kaidan sighed. “Buy me breakfast? I’ll even volunteer to eat in the crew’s mess.”

“Done!” Xiùlán declared. “See you in ninety, Major.”

♦ SSV HONG KONG II · DOCK CHARLIE-SEVEN, BERTH ZERO-THREE · CITADEL ♦

Major Alenko smiled as he approached the Hong Kong’s port side airlock. The hatch was open, as was the custom for ships docked in the Alliance controlled portion of the yard, yet there was a Marine standing guard outside, who came to attention as Kaidan approached the ship. “What may I do for you, Major?”

“I’m here to meet your new Captain, Private … requesting permission to come aboard.”

The Marine touched the comlink in his ear and passed on the request. After a few moments, he returned his attention to Alenko and said, “Actually, a crewman will be here to accompany you down in just a few moments, Sir.”
Kaidan figured his escort would be another grunt, so was totally unprepared when Specialist Miranda Lawson appeared at the hatch. “Captain asked me to escort you down to the crew’s mess area, Sir. Said she’d be buying you breakfast.”

“Thank you, Ms Lawson.” Kaidan entered the airlock and followed as she turned to lead him aft down the tactical passageway. “So, you getting used to life in the Navy?” Alenko immediately wished he could rip out his tongue for giving audible words to such an inane question. ‘She served with Shepard aboard the Cerberus SR-2, you knucklehead! How could she not be used to a military life?!’

Miranda chuckled as she replied, “It’s only been a couple of days, Major, and we haven’t even left port.” She led him to the port side, around the projection well for the galaxy map, pausing as the hatch to the stairwell cycled open, then continued speaking as she started down the stairs, “I’m currently learning the ins and outs of the comm systems in the CIC.”

“Bit of advice?” Kaidan said quietly. “Learn it all, above and beyond, Ms Lawson. There will be times out there when your abilities to ferret out some infinitesimal bit of data will mean success or failure of whatever mission you’re attempting to complete.”

Miranda did not reply until they’d both reached the passageway in front of the elevator.

“Sounds like good advice, Major. Anything else?”

Kaidan had been thinking about Miranda since their dinner ‘date’ the evening of the Normandy’s return to the Citadel. He had hoped to have dinner with her again, but had put off asking her until she had had a chance to deal with everything that had been happening in her life. Thinking, ‘No time like the present!’ he replied, “Yes, there is. I would like for you to join me for dinner again, sometime soon, if you can work it into your schedule.”

Miranda stopped and turned to face Kaidan. “That … sounds nice … Major.” She felt her face going pink as she stammered, “I, ah … that is, my evenings are … well, I’ve been using the time to study the ops manuals for this ship. I … should check with Lieutenant Cross … make sure it would be okay for me to leave the ship for a few hours.”

Kaidan smiled as he motioned for her to lead on. “That’d be great. I expect I’ll be leaving for Grissom Academy after I talk to Admiral Hackett … won’t get to see you again for quite some time.”

Surprised at this revelation, Miranda stopped and turned to face Kaidan again. “Then, we should … I mean, I’ll make an evening available as soon as I can, Major. It’d be … nice. I would like to get to …” here she paused as she felt the heat in her neck and cheeks. “ …well, get to know you better.”

She’s worried about … something. Have to really take it easy with her … “That’d be great. I’ll call you in a few days then.” Kaidan really did want to get to know Miranda better. She had an aura about her … mysterious … possibly dangerous. He knew what Yuán had told him, but it didn’t seem to be enough.

He smiled at her as she pressed the haptic lock outside Yuán’s quarters. She smiled back, but it didn’t reach her eyes, which looked a bit worried as she turned and departed for the elevator.

Yuán opened the door to her office and said, “Good morning, Major. Ready to eat?”

Kaidan nodded as he said, “Yes Ma’am. Hope your cook knows his way around the kitchen … I’m really hungry this morning.”

As they took the few steps around the bulkhead to the mess area, Kaidan looked at Yuán and asked,
“Is everything alright with Ms Lawson? I asked her out for dinner and thought she was going to jump out of her skin.”

Xiùlán sighed as she grabbed a plate full of food and a steaming mug of tea. “I’m working to find some help for her … stress levels. We spent an entire day testifying at the JAG office ashore, and I think some of the memories they brought to the surface are troubling her.” She waited for Kaidan to grab a tray of food, and then led him to a table against the elevator tower bulkhead.

“Truthfully, her job on the HKII is probably the best thing for her right now. Learning our comm systems, signals analysis and tactical data dissemination keeps her incredibly busy; fortunately, she’s extremely focused, so she’s picking up the basics quite rapidly.” Xiùlán smiled as she took a sip from her mug. “But, I didn’t ask you to breakfast to bring you up to date on Specialist Lawson’s training. I need you to do me a favor … one that may ultimately benefit the Alliance.”

Alenko swallowed his food and asked, “What’s the favor?”

“I need you to meet with Commander Bailey at C-Sec,” Xiùlán replied. “I’m going to get him clearance to interrogate a civilian in military custody, and I told him I’d ask you to accompany him.”

“What possible good would that? …” understanding suddenly showed in Kaidan’s eyes. “You want me to use my status as a Council Spectre to help Bailey, don’t you?”

“I think it just may tip the scales in Bailey’s favor, yes. I know your history, Major … and I know you’ve never actually had to ‘lean’ on anyone as a Spectre.” Xiùlán bit into a piece of jam covered toast and chewed thoughtfully as Alenko took a sip of coffee. “Major, you’re one of the good guys. You haven’t used you biotics in anger since …” Yuán saw the instant change in his expression and modified what she had been ready to say, “… well, since before you joined the Navy.”

Alenko’s frown became a dour smile. “This civilian … why’s he in lockup?”

“You already know the answer … I passed you my mission report the evening we had dinner at The Captain’s Table Restaurant,” Xiùlán said with a frown. “He doesn’t have an advocate, and for the things he’s done the Alliance could keep him in a ten-by-ten for a very long time. We don’t have to be nice or play fair with terrorists, and his actions certainly fit the label.” Xiùlán looked directly into Kaidan’s eyes. “That little bastard tortured the specialist up on Deck One, Major. Bailey has a list of charges for crimes committed on the Citadel, including attempting to murder that specialist … and me.”

Kaidan finished his coffee and looked thoughtful for a few moments as he set the mug on the table and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “I’ll go see Bailey … see what he wants me to do. I could wear civilian clothes; keep my job out of the equation.” Kaidan folded his napkin and finished with, “I don’t like it, Captain … deceiving people. But I think in this case, I would be totally justified in applying a bit of … pressure.”

“Thanks, Major,” Xiùlán replied with a genuine smile. “Whatever you can do to help will be appreciated.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I need a favor from you, Captain.” Kaidan placed a hand on his cheek as he thought about how best to ask Xiùlán. “I want to take Miranda to dinner again, but she seems to be even more nervous about going out with me than she was before. Is there anything you can do to convince her my intentions are honorable?”

“I have a plan for her, Major – just waiting for a callback from a friend. I need her fully functional when we leave here. That may sound a bit mean-spirited, and I don’t mean it to be. I think the
world of her, and I’ll do whatever I need to do to get her head on straight. Hopefully, it will happen before you take her out.”

Alenko stood to leave; Xiùlán got to her feet as well. “Thanks for coming to see me, Major. With any luck at all, I’ll have a bit of news for you tonight.”

Alenko smiled. “Thank you, Ma’am. Breakfast was good. I’ll stay in touch.”

♦ ALLIANCE CRUISER SSV SHANGHAI · HIGH EARTH ORBIT, SOL SYSTEM ♦

Lieutenant Sherri Morse brought the Orizaba’s shuttle into the Shanghai’s secondary hanger, reserved for transient shuttles and small freight forwarding carriers of less than 25 meters in overall length. Edi opened the side hatch and stood aside as Morse stepped outside to wait for their passenger; after less than a minute, a pair of Marines entered the hanger through the guarded personnel passage. The woman carrying the transfer bags was accompanied by a corporal carrying what appeared to be a rifle case. As they approached the shuttle, a third person entered the hanger through the same passageway.

The woman carrying the transfer bags stopped in front of Morse, set the bags down and said, “Lieutenant? Gunny Chief Sandra Patton. I’m supposed to be getting a ride to the Normandy?”

Sherri said, “Welcome aboard, Gunny,” as she stuck her hand out. Patton indicated her companion as she shook hands with Morse. “This is Corporal Cassandra Harper, a member of my unit … er, my former unit … and she’s never going to let me forget she wasn’t given time to throw a going away party for me.” Patton smirked at her friend.

Harper set the gun case gently down on its end and let it go. Sherri jumped, intending to prevent it falling onto the deck, only to watch in amazement as a pair of legs quickly extended from some hidden compartment to balance the case at a sixty degree angle. “Sorry, Lieutenant … didn’t mean to surprise you. Sandee has a customized rifle in there, so sprang for the heavy-duty case to keep it safe. And yes, I really did want to throw her a party. Hell, work we’ve been doing ‘outside’, any excuse to party is a good thing!”

“Must be some kind of really special rifle to merit its own case,” Morse replied. “And I can certainly sympathize with wanting to do a bit of partying, even without knowing what kind of work you’re doing out here.”

“Hell, Lieutenant … Every crewman on every ship in orbit here could use a break,” said a rich male voice. Harper and Patton turned as one toward the source of the interruption and answered together. “Captain! I didn’t …”

“Relax, the pair of you … you as well, Lieutenant. I just came out here to wish Ms Patton good luck and a safe flight.” Captain Reuben Warner stuck out his hand. “Gunny, you take care of yourself, you hear? Don’t let the people on that frigate get you hurt or killed. And if you ever get within hailing distance of the Shanghai in the future, please give me a call … I’ll look forward to hearing how you’re doing.”

“Yes Sir … will do, Sir,” Patton replied with an ear-to-ear grin.

“Captain Warner?” Patton’s goodbye to her captain gave Sherri the opportunity she needed. “I have something to give you … a gift from Captain Cody. Just a sec …” She quickly re-entered the UT-
47’s cabin; after a few moments, she reappeared and said, “Captain Cody thought you might enjoy this in your downtime, Sir … that is, if you ever have any real downtime.” She handed the box containing the bottle of Bushmills 21 to the stunned captain.

Warner gazed open-mouthed at the container as Lieutenant Morse handed it to him. *Dammit, Cody! This is just too damned much!* came the thought as he looked up at Morse. “You tell that old pirate I said *thanks*, Lieutenant, and … Damn! I don’t know when or how, but I will pay him back for this surprise!” He grinned, shook her hand, then backed away from the shuttle as Sandra loaded her gear in the crew compartment.

Picking up her rifle, she turned and looked at Warner and Harper, gave them a quick wave and entered the shuttle.

♦  FTL TRANSIT TO CHARON  ♦

Stowing her rifle, she took a seat in the aft row and was in the process of securing her harness when she finally noticed the woman closing and securing the hatch.

“Pardon my curiosity, but you …” was as far as Sandra got before the woman looked directly at her, metallic irises widening slightly in the dimmer interior as she looked through the glowing, orangetinted visor floating in front of her artificial eyes.

Edi took a seat directly across from Patton, her back to the forward bulkhead. As Sherri called back, “… prepare for maneuvering,” Edi attached her safety harness and introduced herself to the gunnery chief as Edi Coré.

Patton was completely amazed. “An AI? … A fully evolved AI? Like the geth? How in hell is that even possible? And the admiral is allowing you to stay aboard the *Normandy*?”

Edi spent their travel time back to the Citadel explaining everything concerning her history, beginning with becoming ‘aware’ on Luna, her time spent as a shackled AI on the *Normandy*, her rescue of the ship’s pilot and vessel from the Collectors, through her ‘merging’ with the platform belonging to Dr Eva Coré while Shepard was on Menae retrieving the turian Primarch for a summit.

Concluding with, “I became a hybrid, bio/mechanical woman as a result of Commander Shepard’s choice to end the harvest. You carry synthetic nanites in your body. It’s part of the reason your eyes have a faint glow that’s visible in low-light conditions.”

Patton had mostly remained quiet during Edi’s brief recounting of her history, only asking an occasional question, but she finally worked up the courage to make a very personal inquiry. “You say you are fully evolved … a bio/mechanical woman? So, can you … I mean …” Sandra paused as her cheeks reddened, embarrassed to even be asking. She finally managed to put the sentences together. “You appear to have boobs … er, breasts. Do you also have … lady parts? Functioning … lady parts?” By this time Sandra felt as if her face was on fire.

Edi smiled at the question. “Before Tali’Zorah vas Normandy and Specialist Samantha Traynor performed a bit of internal rewiring, I had no need to wear clothing, as my external appearance, even *with* the pronounced shape of a pair of breasts, was completely sexless.” Edi grabbed her breasts and pressed slightly. “My breasts now have reactive nipples and the feel of glandular-filled fatty tissue. And yes, I do have functioning … lady parts, as you say.”

Patton nodded. “I’m sorry, Edi. I shouldn’t be asking about your body. Just curiosity, I suppose.” She had a sudden thought. “Wait, you can’t have babies, can you?”
Edi chuckled lightly, surprising Sandra. “I’m anatomically correct externally, Chief, but I possess neither uterus nor ovaries … so no, there is no possibility I could become the mother to a new race of AI’s. Does that idea scare you? It’d be an incredibly inefficient way to begin a new race of people.”

Sandra fell silent, unable to think of other questions for the intriguing ‘person’ sitting in front of her. Sherri called around the bulkhead, “Stand by for transit through the Charon Mass Relay. Next stop, the Widow System.”

♦ SOL SYSTEM • HIGH EARTH ORBIT ♦

Esiz’Qür and Harbinger had been commanding a group of salvage-bots recovering eezo from the broken hulls of Alliance, turian and asari ships; the majority of their salvage recovery came from the remains of their own brethren, shattered hulls in looping, elliptical orbits around the Earth. There were also the massive, unconstrained clouds of glittering eezo in orbit about the planet, which had been targeted for recovery by forces from the Alliance, turian and asari military.

Between the two colossal living machines, so much eezo had been recovered they would have to deposit the excess near the Citadel once Žiuk’Durmah’s needs had been met. Harbinger in particular was anxious to learn how a human and a quarian planned to reestablish an eezo core within Žiuk’Durmah. The human had ended the life of the last Prothean as he betrayed Žiuk’Durmah, then had entered Harbinger’s own structure and used her knowledge of computer code to assist Tali’Zorah-Admiral in remotely ejecting the eezo core from the stricken Repository, thus saving his structure, and his life, from being a victim of the Prothean’s lust for revenge. At the behest of the human – Traynor-Specialist – Harbinger and Esiz’Qür had acquired and stored – in an emergency transfer – all the data from Žiuk’Durmah’s memory banks, the majority of which dealt with the Prothean race; each of them now carried that data in their own memory banks. Harbinger felt an urgent need to return the data to Žiuk’Durmah, and would do whatever was needed in order to facilitate the stricken Repository regaining that data.

Harbinger spoke to Esiz’Qür. »It is time. We must return to the Citadel to assist Traynor Specialist and Tali’Zorah-Admiral in reactivating Žiuk’Durmah.«

»Agreed.« Esiz’Qür gathered all his arms together and rotated his body into the correct orientation as he set a course for the Relay. Energizing his own mass effect core, he lowered his total mass to within 2% of zero and engaged his FTL drive; this action was followed closely by Harbinger. Charon was less than six light hours from Earth, thus the pair of Repositories would arrive in less than eleven minutes.

Harbinger began calling Asharru as he slowed below FTL a minute from the Relay. »Asharru, Contact Orizaba-dreadnaught, Shepard-Normandy, Hong Kong-frigate. I will be arriving with Esiz’Qür at Widow in 4.8 minutes. There is more than the required amount of eezo in our cargo areas. A location will need to be set aside for the surplus. This surplus will be made available to recognized governments that have need of it. Standby! Transiting Charon Relay now.«

SYSTEMS ALLIANCE DOCK C-7, BERTH 03 • LOWER LEVEL • CITADEL

Lieutenant Sherri Morse had grounded the shuttle on the pad between the pair of frigates about which so much activity was swirling, as dried leaves in the grip of winter winds back on Earth. Her passengers had left for the Normandy as soon as the hatch was opened; Gunnery Chief Sandra Patton to take her equipment aboard and report to her new CO, and Edi to check on the status of Commander Shepard.
Before she could take off for the Orizaba, a familiar voice hailed her from just outside the hatch. “Lieutenant, a moment?” LC Steve Cortez leaned around the bulkhead at the front of the crew compartment. “Mind if I ride over to the Orizaba with you?”

Sherri smiled at Cortez as she answered, “Then we’ll both be stuck over there, Sir. I have all my gear packed up … just need a ride back over here.

Cortez returned her smile. “Well, I’m still on leave, so I’m not even supposed to be here, but I arranged with the Orizaba’s XO to have one of their pilots transport us back over here … hell, they can even use this shuttle, since it’s already hot. Saves me having to arrange for a shuttle from Alliance HQ.”

Sherri’s smile grew wider. “Sounds like a good plan to me, Sir … I’m ready to go to work on the Normandy.”

“Not too much going on at the moment, with all the maintenance techs on board,” Cortez responded. “But you’re certainly welcome to get settled in, start looking at the manuals, learn some more about the ship. Your transfer is official as of 1200 today, so your new home is actually visible from your portside viewport.”

Just before Cortez could close the hatch, Major Kaidan Alenko stuck his head inside and asked, “Heading to the Orizaba, LC?”

Cortez smiled as he snarked, “I wasn’t aware this thing had a taxi light on the roof, Major.” Offering his hand, Steve added, “Climb on in. You going over to see the admiral?”

“Yeah, I’m going to meet with him concerning that job at Grissom Academy.” Alenko sat in the center of the back row and fastened his harness. “I think it’d be a good fit for my skills. I haven’t talked to the Council yet … I doubt any of them even remember who I am after the crap Udina and Cerberus pulled during the war. I truly believe having a human Spectre is really just a big inconvenience to all of them, but especially Sparatus.”

“Okay, Major, enjoy the ride,” Cortez said as he closed the hatch. “I’m going to watch the Normandy’s new shuttle pilot show me how it’s done.” So saying, he moved past the bulkhead on the starboard side and took the co-pilot’s seat. “Ready to go, Lieutenant.”

Morse contacted Alliance docking control and requested flight clearance to the Orizaba. When the request was granted, she responded, “Shuttle Charlie-one … acknowledged, and thanks,” as she dialed down the shuttle’s mass and fired the ventral thrusters; she quickly lit the main thrusters to utilize their asymmetrical thrust, spinning the UT-47a around on its axis and easing them out of the docks between the two warships.

“Really sweet …” Cortez murmured under his breath as he glanced at Morse, who instantly grinned. Steve’s face went pink when he realized she’d heard him over the hum and vibration of machinery and engines. “Guess you still have an acute sense of hearing, eh, Lieutenant?”

“Yes Sir,” came the response. “Having a comlink in one ear and an earplug in the other makes hearing stuff around me difficult at times, but I can still hear whispered praise.” Sherri turned her head to look straight at the Commander. “However, I am a bit hard of hearing when it comes to criticism.”

Cortez let out a hearty guffaw. “I expect that’s a trait we all share, Lieutenant. I’ll make sure to raise my voice a bit if I’m leveling any criticism in your direction.” Cortez leaned back in the co-pilot’s chair as he added, “Glad to have you on the Normandy’s team, Lieutenant.”
“Thank you, Sir. I’m really looking forward to this assignment!”

Edi checked her internal chronometer and calculated she had more than enough time to meet with Commander Shepard before she needed to go to Huerta Memorial in order to be at Joker’s side when he woke from his bone-weave surgery.

As she walked through the hanger deck, she was impressed with the differences just since they’d docked; all the crates still aboard when she had helped Joker hack the dry-dock clamps to leave Earth had either been removed or sorted and stacked for use aboard the ship. The multitude of power cables, particularly those that had been hanging down from the exposed structural frames above, had been properly labeled, routed and secured; the temporary power cables lying on the hanger deck had also vanished, having either been routed and secured under the decking as intended or removed altogether.

She felt a bit of … sadness, she supposed, at the sight of the newly emptied recess where Lieutenant Vega had kept his personal gear and weight training equipment; the absence of the heavy bag really brought home the reality of his transfer to the N7 academy on Earth. She would … miss … his presence on the ship.

It appeared to Edi that the Normandy would soon be carrying a bit of extra exploratory equipment – tie down receptacles had been installed at the starboard side shuttle service and storage area in order to equip the ship with an improved Mako ground assault vehicle. The starboard shuttle storage area had been relocated forward, to just behind the main hanger door; for upcoming missions, it would normally be clamped in the arms of the crane, held above the depressed track used by the Mako. For deployment, the crane would traverse laterally to the hanger centerline, from where the shuttle would exit and reenter the ship. She walked past the armory and entered the elevator as she thought about all the changes wrought by Shepard’s actions to end the Reaper war; none were more profound than the changes to each of them personally. Edi was grateful to … just be.

William Cody almost could not believe he was actually awake as he stood at the entrance hatch and gazed into his new quarters aboard the Normandy; the amount of space dedicated to just one person was a luxury normally reserved for admirals. That this had been a civilian version of a turian inspired Alliance frigate, the Normandy SR-1, was not lost on him; Cerberus had wanted Commander Shepard to be extremely comfortable aboard her ship during the Cerberus financed campaign against the Collectors. The office area, twin aquariums (with fish still happily swimming about), full restroom with shower, a sitting area, model display cases full of various spacecraft depicted in exacting detail, armor station and sleeping area were all luxuries unheard of in any other frigate in the fleet.

He turned as the elevator doors opened behind him; Corporal Andrews had most of Cody’s possessions from the Hong Kong on an eezo powered moving cart, which took most of the space in the elevator. “Come on in, Corporal. Set that cart in the office alcove for me.” He grinned wryly as he added, “Shouldn’t be any problem finding places for all my gear in an area this huge.”

“Yes Sir.”

Cody gingerly walked into his new home, avoiding the several electricians working to route and stow the numerous cables that had been left lying and hanging about, even up here. He stepped down the two stairs to the lower level, where he briefly inspected the armor station to port and the comfortable couch and chair opposite. His thoughts were interrupted by Andrew’s question. “Will
that be all, Sir? There are a couple more bags and a box or two left in the hanger.”

Cody looked around at the man. “Yes, that will … actually, no. Just set everything that’s left down there inside the elevator and send it up here – I can certainly get the rest out by myself … you’re free to return to your duties.”

“Yes Sir, Captain. Welcome to the *Normandy*, Sir.” As Andrews entered the elevator to return to the Hanger Deck, Cody received a ping on the ever-present comlink in his ear. The first message was of no great surprise – Gunnery Chief Sandra Patton was onboard reporting for duty; it was the second message that intrigued him. The two dreadnaught Reapers were back in the Widow System, each bearing a huge amount of recovered, refined eezo. He brought up his omnitool and sent a message, first to Specialist Traynor, who was ashore enjoying her leave time, then to XO Greg Adams, also ashore on the Citadel. Finally, he touched his comlink and said, “Corporal Andrews, please have Ms Patton temporarily stow her kit in the starboard cargo compartment on Deck Four, then send her up to see me.”

♦ SSV ORIZABA · OFFICE OF FLEET ADMIRAL STEVEN HACKETT ♦

Admiral Hackett stood to greet the Orizaba’s captain as he entered the office and came to parade rest in front of Hackett’s desk. “What have you got for me, Captain?”

“One of the teams from the *Hong Kong* found the bodies of Lieutenant Yvonne Miller and Marine Sergeant Thomas Dunn a quarter-click from the JAG offices.” Captain Everett looked down as he slowly shook his head, then returned his gaze to Hackett as he continued. “Each had been shot execution style, back of their heads; bodies were tossed in a trash compactor, along with the diplomatic case that was supposed to be delivered to General Park in Vancouver … guess they figured they’d have everything well in hand by the time the bodies were discovered, if they ever were discovered.”

Hackett returned to his chair, where he poured himself a glass of water. Leaning back in his chair, he motioned for Everett to help himself and have a seat across from him.

Everett sighed heavily as he sat down. “Miller and Dunn would have never seen it coming, Sir. According to the Marines from the *Shanghai*, our charlatans were correctly dressed, with all their insignia and ribbons placed and arranged correctly. Bastards must have had inside information to set this up so well. Once they had the omnitools from the couriers, they had whatever info they needed to fill in the gaps.”

Hackett took a sip of water and looked in the glass, as if the answers he needed would be found floating around in the clear liquid. “Where is the case, Captain? I know it sounds callous as hell, but we need to make sure someone from the JAG office retrieves that son of a bitch as soon as possible … and they need to make sure everything that was being sent is still intact and presentable. Just be sure to verify the identity of whomever has the key three ways from Sunday! No slip ups, understand?”

Captain Everett could sense the approaching dismissal in Hackett’s tone, but offered one more thought for consideration. “Sir, we’ll still have to deliver that case to Vancouver when it’s ready again. I’ve read the report concerning the promotions and transfers you made on the *Normandy*. It’s possible that the person we need to hand-deliver that case is already employed by the Alliance, has already made one trip to Vancouver and proved herself knowledgeable and trustworthy. Maybe we should assign the task to Edi Coré.”

Hackett’s eyes showed surprise at Everett’s suggestion. “She’s not a member of the Alliance, Ron …
my fault, I suppose. Mistrust of AI’s, starting with the geth. You think I should have offered her a position in the Navy?”

“In my opinion, she’s already earned her stripes, Sir. Question is, would she even want to join?” Everett rose from his chair. “I’ll make sure the case gets back to the JAG offices, Admiral. Is there anything else?”

It was Hackett’s turn to sigh. “Dammit Ron, things were supposed to get easier once the war was over. Seems there’s always some group or faction to step in once the main enemy has been beaten.” Shaking his head slightly, he looked up at the Orizaba’s captain and finished with, “That’ll be all Ron … Oh crap, I just remembered …”

Everett had started to turn for the door but paused. “Yes, Sir? …”

“Major Alenko is supposed to be coming over to meet with me … may already be on board. Have him brought up here soon as you see him, Captain … Thanks.”

“Yes Sir.”
Head Games

It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult undertaking which, more than anything else, will determine its successful outcome. — William James

♦ SSV ORIZABA · OFFICE OF FLEET ADMIRAL STEVEN HACKETT ♦

The hatch lock on Hackett’s office door chimed as he finished clearing his desk from his previous meeting; after remotely keying the lock he stood behind his desk, hands clasped behind him as Major Alenko entered, stopped just inside the doorway and saluted. Hackett returned the salute, then waved the major to one of the two chairs sitting in front of the desk.

Kaidan offered his hand to the admiral as he stepped up to the desk; taking a seat, he waited for the man to speak. “So, how are you doing, Major? Adjusting to …” here Hackett brought up both hands to make ‘air quotes’, “… a ‘civilized lifestyle’ free of war?”

Alenko smiled as he answered, “Things on the Citadel do seem to be a lot quieter these days, Admiral. Easy to get used to taking meals and hitting my rack at a regular time. I just hope nothing happens to change that anytime soon.”

“So, you must be here to talk to me about Grissom Academy.”

“Yes Sir. I’d like to take the assignment as Chief of Staff there, and I wanted to talk with you concerning Kaylee Sanders.” Pausing for a moment, Alenko continued with a question. “Is she still on Elysium?”

“Last we heard,” Hackett replied in a quiet voice. “She’s been checking in with Alliance Command on a regular basis, and all her communications are time and date-stamped from Elysium. Her med-leave reimbursements are deposited straight into her account, so we have no indication there’s anything out of the ordinary with her situation.”

“Has there been any further word from London concerning Jack, or her students?”

“Not since before the Normandy docked.” Hackett sighed. “Greater London covers a helluva lot of square kilometers – or miles, if you like the way the British still measure things – just over 600 miles square.”

Kaidan ran the calculation in his head. “What’s that, between 1550 and 1555 square kilometers?”

Hackett chuckled. “And mostly rubble these days. It’s a huge area to search, so we can only hope that if Jack and what’s left of her students are still in the city, they’re simply keeping their heads down and actually want to be extracted.”

Hackett stroked his chin, then took a sip of water from the glass on his desk before continuing. “I’ll cut the orders for you, Major. You have 23 days left on your leave, after which, I’ll send you to Elysium to see if you can persuade Sanders to return to Grissom … that is, if you can locate her. She was always plenty good at keeping herself hidden from casual view.”

Hackett grinned. “In the meantime, you may also wish to get in a little sightseeing on Earth. You do realize Vancouver is pretty much rubble, just like London and every other major city on the planet.”
Alenko leaned forward in his chair as he replied, “Certainly. And that does remind me, I have to meet with C-Sec Commander Bailey on Monday. Something about questioning a prisoner tied to all the attempts on the lives of Captain Yuán and Specialist Lawson.”

Hackett leaned back in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck. “Looks like the Blue Suns are somehow tied to all this mess. I’ll certainly be pleased when we can put this business behind us so we can get on with the work that really needs to be done.” The admiral stood and offered his hand. “I’m glad you decided to go to Grissom Academy, Major; regardless if you can persuade Sanders to return with you, it should prove to be a good fit for your skills.”

Alenko shook Hackett’s hand as he stood and said, “Thank you, Sir,” then turned and left.

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1925 HOURS · SATURDAY, 26 JANUARY 2188

Gunnery Chief Sandra Patton was a bit disappointed. She had just arrived by shuttle from the SSV Shanghai, and was immediately astonished by how much less space was available on the Normandy. Entering the ship through the hanger bay ramp on deck five, she had walked the length of the hanger, past two new Kodiak Mk.2a shuttlecraft, the weapons lockers and workbench, the captain’s personal armor station and several repair stations before reaching the cargo elevator that doubled as an elevator for ship’s personnel.

The massive doors opened as she approached, revealing a very busy young fellow with a hover-lift; he parked it beside a small stack of transfer platforms as soon as he noticed her walking towards him. “Gunnery Chief Patton? How was your flight?” Sticking a hand out, he continued, “I’m Corporal Andrews … welcome to the Normandy SR2, Gunnery Chief.”

“Nice to meet you, Corporal.” Patton shook his hand as she added, “And just call me ‘Gunny’.”

Andrews smiled as he replied, “Captain Cody asked me to have you temporarily stow your gear in the starboard cargo compartment on Deck Four, then escort you up to meet with him. If you’ll follow me?”

As she followed him, she asked, “This the only elevator on the ship, Corporal?”

“I’m afraid so, Gunnery Chief. Ship this size, every bit of space counts … can’t eat or sleep in an elevator, so this is the only one.” As he finished, the door segments retracted into their recesses and Andrews stepped out onto the Deck Four passageway between port and starboard cargo storage. “Right this way, Gunny.”

Andrews led Patton to the right, past the view ports looking down on the hanger deck and the starboard engineering access hatch; stopping in front of the cargo compartment entrance, he typed an access code into his omnitool, changing the haptic interface from red to green. Unlatching and opening the door, he led the new crewman into the compartment, pointing out where she could set her bags and gun case.

“Your stuff will be safe in here; access codes change daily,” then added with a hint of pride, “and they’re only known to a select few. Soon as you see the Captain, you’ll receive your berth assignment so you can get squared away.”

Patton set her transfer bags on the deck, then carefully set her rifle case next to the bags. Corporal Andrews asked, “Personal weapon, Gunnery Chief?”

“Jörmangund Technology’s Helix model 10 Rifle … been with me since 2179. There are newer,
fancier rifles out there, but I’ve been able to make really sweet music with this one for quite a while. Custom scope, custom stock, recoil dampener, specially modified block shaver. Most of these things overheat after two shots … I can fire three in a row and bullseye my target with each shot. Cool down takes a third less time than standard, and I don’t have to worry about finding a thermal clip in the field.”

“Sounds like that rifle’s older than me,” observed Andrews. “Allow me to show you to the captain’s quarters.” Andrews headed back to the cross-ship passageway and reentered the elevator. “Captain’s quarters are on deck one. I have this gear to move up there,” he said as he waved at the small pile in the rear corner. The corporal entered a release code for the control panel, then crossed his arms as the doors automatically closed.

Patton stood quietly as the elevator silently ascended to deck one; she stepped out as the doors opened, and was surprised to find only a small area outside the elevator, with another segmented door, three meters away and offset to port. Corporal Andrews moved past her to touch the haptic lock, thus ‘ringing’ the access chime inside; the door responded almost immediately by opening onto the plushest private quarters Patton had ever seen on an Alliance warship.

“Gunnery Chief Patton!” A voice boomed out from somewhere in the forward portion of the massive compartment. “Welcome to the Normandy! Please, come on in!”

Sandra hesitantly followed the corporal into the compartment, noting with fascination the huge double-aquarium to the left, the massive display of model ships on the right, and down a short flight of stairs, the captain’s living quarters. Cody was busy putting away his clothes, along with the linens for the bed and bath as Andrews walked up to his side. “Got the last of your stuff from the Hong Kong in the elevator, Sir.” The corporal looked over his shoulder as Patton came up behind him. “Gunny, this is Captain William Cody … Captain, Gunnery Chief Sandra Patton.”

Cody stood and turned, took a few steps towards her and extended his hand. “Patton … a pleasure to meet you.” He pumped her hand twice, let go and added, “You come highly recommended. I hope your stay on the Normandy will be enjoyable.”

Sandra actually laughed out loud. “I’ve never thought of an assignment on a ship as something to be enjoyed, Captain. More like … something to be endured.” After a brief pause, she added, “Don’t misunderstand, Captain … I never felt my assignment on the Shanghai was a bad thing, until the past few months. Spent every day outside the ship, recovering … well, people. All those destroyed ships … crews spaced, orbiting Earth …”

Directing his attention back towards Andrews for a moment, Cody said, “Put that last lot by my desk inside the door, Corporal … and thanks for moving this last batch in for me.”

He frowned as he turned back towards Patton. “I saw what was there, Gunny, when the HK2 returned from Arcturus. All the years I’ve been in the Navy, never seen anything to equal that level of destruction … hope I never have to witness it again.”

Motioning Patton to sit on the couch, he took a seat in the desk chair and continued. “I’ve also found there’s no use in bemoaning the bad things about an assignment, because there really is no ideal assignment … for anyone! I’ve been on ships where the Captain and the XO were right proper tyrants … taught me there’s no point in being that way. People don’t respond to dictators very well. That’s not to imply I’m a pushover by any means, but neither am I a micromanager; I simply prefer to assign people their jobs and let them figure out how best to accomplish what needs to be done. People that don’t perform well for me are not going to do any better under a different commander.” Cody paused for a moment, then asked, “Would you like some water, Chief?”
“Actually, I would like to see where I’ll be sleeping tonight, Sir. It’s been a long day.”

Cody rose and began moving to the upper level as Patton followed. “Fair enough. Promotions will happen Monday morning. Admiral is coming over from the Orizaba to participate … along with your own, I’m going to promote my propulsion engineer, and Captain Yuán on the Hong Kong will be promoting her former comms specialist to Lieutenant Commander. As soon as that’s all done, we can get you into your new ‘office’ and have you start work.”

“Office, Sir?”

Cody chuckled. “The forward battery, Gunnery Chief. I expect you’ll be spending a lot of time there. I’m told Commander Shepard’s weapons officer virtually lived in that compartment during their campaign to eliminate the Collectors and during the Reaper War. Don’t know how much truth there is to that, but I bet we can find out.” He turned as Andrews brought in another transfer crate. “That the last one, Corporal?”

“Yes sir. Is there anything else?”

“Accompany Gunnery Chief Patton down to Deck Three, find and introduce her to the senior female non-comm and let her know Patton here needs a berth and a place to stow her gear.”

Turning back to Sandra, he finished with, “Again, nice to have you aboard, Gunny. Get settled in, get some rest. Tomorrow you can walk the ship, visit the forward battery, and learn the ins and outs everywhere else before the rest of the crew returns. Oh! I nearly forgot … Zaeed Massani is onboard. The old merc spends most of his time in the mess area. I think he’s looking forward to seeing you again. And your department CO is Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez; he’s currently on leave, but he’s been in and out of the ship as some of the retrofits have been completed … I’ll send him a text, let him know his new Weapons Control Officer is aboard.”

Patton had frowned slightly upon hearing Massani was aboard this ship, but smiled again at hearing about the department CO. “Thank you, Sir. I appreciate you giving me this opportunity.”

*EARLY EVENING · SATURDAY, 26 JANUARY 2188*

Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau was in someplace strange … an overwhelming sense of lightness, of floating weightless, in a safe, warm nest of softness made him wish to never regain full wakefulness. He had never slept so well, so painlessly. Before, he was always aware of the smaller bones—in his hands and wrists, in his feet. He had fractured a rib or three at times, just from sneezing or coughing. He no longer felt like that was something that could happen in the future. He risked opening one eye, just to find out in what part of heaven—or hell—he had happened to land. Must be heaven, he thought. There’s an angel right in front of me! Opening his eye slightly wider, he surreptitiously studied her face and upper body. Humphh. Didn’t think angels were so … voluptuous. Looks as if a deep breath will pop those ladies right out of her blouse! Bet that would be a sight! And her face ... silvery, metallic sheen, with delicate features. Eyes have tiny circlips; must be holding her irises in place, and she’s wearing a halo. Wonder why it’s over her eyes. And her lips ... full, sensuous. Damn! ... I must be in hell. No way I’d go somewhere where all the women look great and are unattainable. Just wouldn’t be fair. Wait ... did she just say my name?

“Jeff … Jeff?” Edi gently placed a hand on his fingers, just below the I.V. tube. “Jeff, wake up. It’s me … Edi. Your operation was a success. You’re in the recovery area. Jeff?”

Joker groaned and opened his eyes fully as he attempted to move; Edi stopped him, saying, “Let me,
Joker felt the bed vibrate slightly as hidden motors raised the portion under his torso. He tried to talk, to say ‘thanks’ but couldn’t get any words to form with his mouth and throat so parched. “Here, Jeff. Try sucking on a few of these …” Edi held a small cup full of ice chips to his lips. “Slowly. Not too much. You’ve had a busy day.”

“As did you, my dear.” Karin Chakwas had quietly entered to check on her patient but couldn’t resist teasing the silver-skinned woman. “I understand you and Lieutenant Morse had a bit of fun in Vancouver. Seems the Blue Suns are getting bolder every day.”

Joker perked up at this and croaked out, “What kind of fun, Edi? What the hell happened down there?”

Karin chuckled, answering before Edi could reply, “She can tell you tomorrow, Jeff. I want you to lie back down, …” here she returned the head of the bed to its normal position, “… and get some more sleep. You received some serious augmentation today. Best thing for you is sleep so your body can heal. You need anything, ring for the night attendant, okay?” Karin placed an arm around Edi as she said, “Come on, Ms Coré. You can catch me up while we enjoy a late dinner downstairs.

Captain Yuán was having dinner an hour late. There seemed to always be something that needed her attention—not really that much different from her time as XO under Captain Cody. She had just finished her main course … Sautéed Crab with Shanghainese Rice Cake accompanied by a half-litre of Ha’ěrbīn Pǐjǐù [哈爾濱啤酒 - Harbin Brewery] beer. She had been on the Hong Kong long enough for the cook to learn her likes and dislikes concerning her food and the way it was prepared; she normally had what everyone else was having, but once a week or so it was nice to have a taste of home, particularly because she wasn’t likely to return there anytime soon.

Her omni-tool lit up and trilled as she took her dishes to the small clean-up area … the mess chief took them with a smile, saying, “There’s mango pudding in the ‘fridge, anytime you’re ready, Cap’n.”

“Thanks, Chief. Looks like I’ll be a bit, but I’ll certainly get to it … never missed a chance to enjoy some mango pudding when the opportunity presented itself.” Yuán walked around the bulkhead and entered her office, waiting until the lock was engaged before answering the page from the device.

“This is Captain Yuán. What may I do for you?”

The voice at the other end of the connection did not sound familiar. “Captain, my name is Dalis Shegos, an aide for asari Councilor Tevos. Mallene Calis asked me to convey her regrets for not being able to personally respond to your inquiry, but she did speak to the councilor about your … situation … and asked that we contact you. We may have a way to accommodate your request and possibly obtain the assistance your friend requires … assuming your friend is a willing participant. Would you have time in your schedule to meet with us in the councilor’s office, tomorrow morning at, say … 0830?”

Yuán hesitated slightly before responding, “I’m sorry, Ms Shegos. I am … uncertain … how the asari councilor’s office became involved. I didn’t mean for this to become a diplomatic issue … I spoke to Mallene as a friend, merely asking for a reference.”

The aide laughed lightly, “Please, Captain. I prefer you address me simply as Dalis but, if you insist on formality, Matron Shegos will do as well. In regards to this becoming a diplomatic issue, do not let such a thing concern you, Captain. The Normandy’s reputation precedes her … as does every person who served on her, no matter their capacity. We are more than happy to provide assistance
Yuán desperately wanted to give Miranda some way to deal with the trauma inflicted upon her by the Blue Suns, so accepted the offer in spite of her concerns. “Do you need to see only me first, or would you want … my friend … to accompany me, Ms … ah, excuse me … Matron Shegos?”

“Most definitely, please bring her along. I am sure you know where the Council offices are located on the Presidium, Captain Yuán?”

“Absolutely, Dalis. I look forward to meeting you.”

Miranda Lawson walked beside her captain … her friend, Xiùlán; they were on their way to the Asari Councilor’s office, in a very unexpected turn of events. As a former member of Cerberus, Miranda was extremely nervous as she and Xiùlán processed through Embassy security, but they made it through without incident.

Immediately after passing through the security checkpoint, an elegant matron rose from a bench along the wall and spoke softly in question, “Captain Yuán? Ms Lawson?” Upon their acknowledgement, the Asari bowed gracefully. As she returned to her upright posture, she continued in a polite tone, “Good morning. I am Dalis Shegos, Councilor Tevos’ personal assistant. I am happy to meet both of you, and it is my privilege to escort you to the councilor’s offices.” She indicated their direction with an elegant wave of her hand before turning and starting to walk. “If you would follow me, please?” The humans followed the asari down a short hallway to the councilor’s wing.

Their escort silently opened the door and beckoned them to precede her into the reception space; Xiùlán and Miranda cautiously entered the large room. Dalis smiled and directed them to a small seating area. “Please … Relax for a few moments while I inform the councilor you have arrived.” Dalis stepped away quietly and entered what Miranda and Xiùlán assumed to be Tevos’ private office.

She quickly returned and stated, “The councilor is prepared to see you immediately and will await your arrival in one of our hospitality rooms. She felt it would be more … comfortable … than meeting in her office.” Motioning with her right arm, she continued with, “Down this passageway … last door on your left. Please, be neither surprised nor offended; you will be met at the door by Huntress Nizia Tenir, Councilor Tevos’ personal bodyguard. She will secure your weapons before you enter the suites … you will not be permitted to carry them in the presence of the councilor; and please bear in mind, if there is anything I can do to make your visit more pleasant, all you need to do is ask.”

As warned, the asari huntress greeted them when the door opened; she scanned both humans after setting Yuán’s heavy pistol and shotgun, along with Miranda’s pistol, on the side table just inside the door. “You must be expecting trouble,” Tenir remarked.

“No more than usual,” Xiùlán snarked. “Haven’t been attacked the last few times I’ve been off my ship; maybe it’s because I never come ashore anymore unless I’m conspicuously armed and armored.”

Tenir met Yuán’s eyes. “Your weapons will be returned when you leave, Captain. No harm will
come to either of you in this place. Now, if you will please follow me, I will introduce you to Councilor Tevos.”

With the huntress leading the way, Xiùlán and Miranda passed through the anteroom and entered the main hospitality suite used by Councilor Raesia Tevos. The main room was set as a rectangle, with a low, centrally placed oval table surrounded on three sides by a cozy, sectional couch and two leather covered wing chairs, one at either end of the table. On the fourth side, and at some distance, was a wall that held an enormous fish tank. The councilor was tucked casually onto the end of the couch with a second Asari sitting in the near chair; both stood as Tenir approached with the humans in tow.

“Madam Councilor, I am honored to present Alliance Navy Captain Yuán Xiùlán and Alliance Communications Specialist Miranda Lawson of the frigate SSV Hong Kong.” Tenir turned to Yuán and Lawson, saying, “Councilor Raesia Tevos; Consort Sha’ira.”

Tevos eyes went wide in recognition as she stared at Xiùlán; she held her hands out palms up and said, “By the Goddess, Captain! Please, forgive me … I did not make the connection until this very minute! It was you … seven years ago, before the Reapers … before Sovereign! You were one of the three Alliance agents responsible for retrieving an ancient asari figurine from Cartagena Station!”

Yuán placed the palms of her hands on Tevos’ as she quietly responded, “You honor me, Councilor. The Alliance covered up everything about that mission … including my involvement in it. Forgive me, Madam Councilor, but how do you know of any of that?”

Tevos smiled as she turned her hands to gently grasp those of the young woman in front of her. “You must realize my position allows me knowledge about a great deal of things happening in the galaxy. Would it surprise you to learn the Alliance’s program for training special operatives was a poorly guarded secret? Asari High Command was fully aware of your mission to recover that figurine, Captain.” Glancing down at Xiùlán’s leg, she added, “I also know that you personally paid an enormous physical price for your participation.” Tevos released Xiùlán’s hands as she finished with, “You and your comrades have my gratitude for recovering that artifact, Captain. The asari people are forever in your debt.”

Tevos took a step back and bowed deeply towards Xiùlán before gesturing casually toward the couches, inviting them to sit as she continued, “It is still quite early. Would either of you care for a beverage … some hot tea, perhaps? Or Kaffe?”

Xiùlán asked for tea, while Miranda wanted to know what Kaffe was.

Tevos smiled as she responded, “It is similar to a half-and-half blend of your coffee and hot cocoa, Specialist Lawson … I think you would enjoy it.

Miranda smiled back nervously. “Sounds wonderful. I’d like to try a cup … and please,” she added shyly, “you may simply call me Miranda.”

“Very good.” Tevos summoned Dalis and requested the beverages and china service. Returning her attention to her guests, she looked first at Miranda. “You have a very good friend in Yuán Xiùlán, Miranda. Her concern for your mental health is what brought both of you to my offices today. Consort Sha’ira happens to be a … close … personal friend to me and, under the circumstances, was willing to meet with you on short notice. We decided this meeting should be held here instead of at her facilities in order to afford as much privacy for you as possible.”

“A Consort?” Miranda glanced quickly at Xiùlán before looking back at Tevos. “No offense intended to either of you, Councilor, but I don’t understand her purpose here.”
Halting Tevos’ answer before it ever began, Sha’ira laid a hand softly on the councilor’s arm and answered for herself. “No offense taken, Miranda. My position is frequently misunderstood by non-asari, humans in particular. Many believe I am simply what people on Earth in more polite circles refer to as a Madam, when in truth I am a highly trained counselor, with many more tools at my disposal than any human counselor could ever dream to possess.” A smile played across the consort’s lips. “No offense intended.”

Even as nervous as she was, Miranda couldn’t help but smile at the tongue-in-cheek comment, but her good humor faded quickly as she asked her next question. “So … are you fully aware of my situation?”

Tevos shook her head from side-to-side as she responded, “No, we know only what your captain revealed to Mallene … and we do not need to hear about it at the moment. That is the purview of Sha’ira, and Sha’ira alone. I would not presume to use my position here to insert myself into what should be your private counseling sessions.” She looked up as Dalis brought in a large silver tray bearing several cups on saucers, three serving pots with spouts, linen napkins and sweetbread cookies, similar to those made on Earth before the war had nearly destroyed everything and everyone.

After each of them had taken a filled cup and a cookie, Tevos looked at Miranda and continued, “You told Yuán you would not be opposed to a meld with an asari if it could help you deal with your past and allow you to move ahead with your life. That is why Sha’ira is here. Once we are done with the introductions and determine that you are comfortable with the process, I will return to my office and this room will be at your disposal for as long as you need it today.”

“That is most kind of you, Councilor. I was not expecting special treatment in this matter,” Xiùlán responded.

Tevos chuckled lightly as she responded. “It is the least we can do, Captain. Sha’ira is extremely competent in every aspect of her profession.” Looking at Miranda, she smiled comfortingly as she added, “Provided the course of action is amenable to you, you will be in very good hands, my dear.

Miranda looked at Sha’ira and asked in a tentative voice, “How do you intend to help me? What is involved in a meld?”

Sha’ira answered reassuringly, “Miranda, I will neither erase nor suppress your memories of that time in your life. I am quite proficient at compartmentalizing and mitigating painful memories. My goal is to guide you through the proper mental techniques to do that for yourself, as only you can judge if the memories you hold need to be locked away. You will need to trust me when I say I will not harm you, and I will most definitely not look into any portion of your mind you are unwilling to open to me. If that’s agreeable, I suggest you finish your Kaffe so we may begin.”

Miranda turned slightly on the couch in order to look directly at Xiùlán. “Captain, I spent more than a few years as a member of the most rabid group of xenophobes to ever leave Earth. I was Jack Harper’s top agent, for heaven’s sake! Whatever made you think I would be ready to attempt such a … joining? I know you believe this is the way to proceed, but … I’m scared, Captain. I’m just … suddenly, I’m very unsure …”

Xiùlán reached over and took Miranda’s hand. “Because you left Cerberus, and you’re certainly nothing like Jack Harper. You just need a bit of faith, Miri. I wouldn’t have requested their help if I had any doubts about the results.” Glancing at the asari consort, she added, “If it is permitted, I will stay by your side throughout your meld with Sha’ira. I am convinced this is the best way for you to deal with the memories from that time.”
Xiùlán redirected her gaze to Sha’ira and said, “There is a very real likelihood Miranda will be called as a witness against the man responsible for her captivity and physical trauma. She will need to be able to call up those memories while in his presence in order to testify, so I am hoping you can help her … control … her own reaction to those memories so they do not overwhelm her when she does have to recall them.”

“I will do what I can, Captain Yuán,” came the ready reply. “But much depends on Miranda. She will determine how the recall of the events affects her—as to whether or not they will still exert control over her, I cannot say. I will neither alter her mind nor her memories; I can merely provide her the necessary tools to deal with those memories more … appropriately. It will be up to her to utilize the tools I provide.” Sha’ira smiled and added, “And, you are most welcome to stay during the session, Captain. I believe your presence will be a stabilizing influence for Miranda, but I must insist that you neither touch nor attempt to talk to either of us during the meld.”

Yuán nodded in agreement and squeezed Miranda’s hand, glancing at her friend. Truth be told, Xiùlán really didn’t want to be witness to this process, lest Miranda talk about something she preferred to keep private, but was willing to do whatever her friend required of her. “Your decision, Miri.”

Miranda shifted uncomfortably in her seat and then squared her shoulders, a look of determination finally crossing her face. “If we want Joesiar to face justice, I can’t give him the satisfaction of breaking down in the courtroom, now can I?” She looked pointedly at Sha’ira as she continued, “Do what you need to do, Consort. I will try to be open to this … procedure.”

Sha’ira closed her eyes and dipped her head ever so slightly with a small incline to the right. “Thank you for your willingness to undertake what you apparently view as yet another ordeal, Ms Lawson. I promise you, I will not abuse the trust you have placed in me … and I pray to the Goddess that you will be satisfied with the results.”

As Sha’ira opened her eyes and lifted her head to meet Miranda’s cautious gaze, Tevos rose gracefully from the couch and bowed politely. “I will take that as my cue to give you the privacy you require.” Her eyes swept over the group. “If you need anything, my staff is at your disposal; simply send a message to Dalis and she will provide whatever it is you require.”

Tevos departed quickly and, with no more than a glance at Tenir, the huntress followed behind, securing the doors behind her as they left the room. Miranda clutched tightly to Yuán’s hand and peered apprehensively at Sha’ira. “So, how does this begin?”

“Why don’t we start with a more conventional method by human standards?” Sha’ira smiled tenderly. “We’ll commence with you telling me what happened.”

Xiùlán immediately offered up the medical report for Sha’ira’s perusal, which the Consort just as promptly declined. “If Miranda is to be successful at confronting her demons in public, she must first be able to do so here.” She indicated the datapad in Xiùlán’s hand. “I am sorry, but she will be asked questions about this, and she needs to be able to answer, without referring to a transcript from her doctor. If I am correct in interpreting your legal process, pointing to a medical report will not be sufficient as testimony.”

“Unfortunately, that is most likely correct, Consort.” Xiùlán withdrew the datapad and dropped it onto the couch at her side before turning to Miranda. “Guess you’re up, Miri.”

Miranda closed her eyes and took a deep breath before beginning the description of her treatment at the hands of her captors. “I ended up with a concussion and several fractured cheekbones, mostly limited to the left side, from repeated blows to my head.” Reaching up, she placed her fingers on the
patch she still wore as she added, “It cost me my left eye.” Her speech was quiet and her voice trembled as she spoke. “One especially brutal evening, I was assaulted by humans. They tied me up between a pair of posts and treated me like a punching bag in a gym. They hit me, over and over, front, sides, back … they fractured multiple ribs, causing severe bruising over both kidneys and my liver, as well as a lacerated spleen. When they got bored with the beatings, they began taking turns …” Miranda paused and drew another deep breath in an ill-fated attempt to calm herself before opening her eyes and looking pleadingly at Xiùlán and then Sha’ira. “I …” Her wavering voice stopped again and she dropped her head, tears running down her face, unable to continue.

Sha’ira reached over and gently stroked Miranda’s arm in comfort. “This is where I can help you, Miranda Lawson. Those events are done; they can no longer harm you if you do not let them. The physical danger is past and only the psychological trauma continues … but only if you allow it to do so.” Sha’ira glanced at Xiùlán and then at the captain’s hands, still entwined with Miranda’s.

Xiùlán understood immediately and gave one last squeeze before pulling her hands slowly away, speaking softly. “It’s time, Miranda; time to conquer those demons. I’ll sit across from you if that will be okay? I need to avoid inadvertent contact to keep you safe.”

Miranda’s tear-streaked face came up, her right eye puffy and dark. Her normally bright orb held a raging storm of discontent tinged with fear, but her hands opened to reluctantly release her captain’s fingers. “Just promise you won’t leave the room?”

“Absolutely,” Xiùlán stated without hesitation. “I will not leave without you knowing.”

As Miranda’s attention returned to Sha’ira, the consort shifted her position to be closer to the human. “We need skin-to-skin contact, Miranda. I will not lie; the touch will be very … intimate … so I will give you time to accustom yourself to it.”

Following a hesitant nod of permission, Sha’ira gently clasped one of Miranda’s hands and, with her other hand, reached up and around to gently cup, then caress the human’s cheek. Her touch was soft and comforting as she explained, “A meld is a very personal thing. It is unique to each pairing; no two beings connect the same as with anyone else.” Her voice was low and soothing as she continued her comforting strokes. “I will move no faster than a pace with which you are agreeable. I will not push. I can present myself to you but you must invite me in.” She saw the confusion in Miranda’s eyes and smiled. “You will understand exactly what I mean when I initiate the meld, Miranda Lawson. I will not enter your mind uninvited. You must be a willing participant.”

“Oh, God.” Miranda closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her skin tingling under the unfamiliar touch of the consort. She inadvertently flinched and Sha’ira’s hand froze, giving her human patient time to breathe deeply and calm herself once more. Sha’ira made small talk, but progressed no further until Miranda reached a level of comfort where she finally relaxed again, easing back into the asari’s touch.

Taking that as a promising sign, Sha’ira queried, “Are you ready to make our first attempt, Miranda?”

“First attempt?” Miranda’s voice had a tense squeak to it, demonstrating her remaining nervousness at the prospect of an intrusion into her mind.

“I would be a fool to assume a mind such as yours would so easily welcome a relative stranger’s touch. A non-human’s touch.” Sha’ira laughed gently. “It will not surprise me if it takes multiple tries before you open enough for us to truly … connect.”

Somewhat mortified by Sha’ira’s emphasis on non-human, Miranda flushed as she queried, “Even if
I want it to happen?” Over the course of the morning’s conversation, Miranda had become more comfortable with the presence of the consort and her lips turned up into a light smile. “I fully realize I need this … and while I may have been a member of Cerberus, I’ve never been a xenophobe. I think you’ll be surprised at just how determined I can be, once I decide upon a path.”

Sha’ira’s laugh became more robust and she squeezed Miranda’s hand tightly for a moment while her other hand shifted from the human’s cheek to wrap tenderly around the back of Miranda’s neck. “Then let us see how ready you are to accept me.” She tugged gently and, after a moment’s hesitation, Miranda closed her eyes and leaned towards her, expecting to touch foreheads with the consort … Sha’ira had warned the contact would be intimate, and Miranda had seen the forehead touch between Shepard and Liara on multiple occasions.

She was surprised when she felt a pair of warm lips on her forehead; she pulled back only momentarily before forcing herself to relax into the sensation. “Perhaps you are more ready for this than I anticipated, Miranda.” Sha’ira’s hand gave one last reassuring stroke as she whispered, “Embrace eternity.”

At first, Miranda felt nothing; then slowly, there was an … awareness … building at the back of her mind … as if she had an idea that she couldn’t quite pull to the front of her consciousness. Dammit! She redoubled her effort and concentrated on the feeling … purposely seeking it, trying to unveil whatever was hiding in her subconscious, to reveal its elusive secret.

The ground suddenly seemed to fall out from beneath her feet and Miranda, in an effort to stop the swooping sensation of vertigo, reacted on instinct. Her hands grabbed tight in an attempt to catch herself and stop her fall … and Sha’ira’s pained voice finally broke through her transitory distress.

“Miranda … Please … You are safe with me in the Councilor’s hospitality room. Remember. All is well.”

“My, God! That’s … frightening … and amazing at the same time!” Miranda took a couple of deep breaths and began to relax, finally forcing her fists to unclench. She felt Sha’ira sigh in relief as the crushing pain eased in her fingers and Miranda immediately realized what she had done. “Oh, my God! Sha’ira! I am so sorry! Is your hand alright?”

“I am fine. Please do not concern yourself; there are a number of possible reactions that could have been much more painful to me. I was prepared to endure any or all of them.” To prove her point, Sha’ira squeezed Miranda’s hand gently in return. “Now. I need you to quit speaking aloud and merely think … Think again about your captivity.”

Sha’ira winced slightly when Miranda immediately tensed back up in reaction to her statement. “While I stated I was prepared to endure, I did not intend the words as permission for you to repeat the action, Ms Lawson.” Miranda could feel the mirth radiate from Sha’ira as the asari continued her thought in an attempt to ease the human’s surge of guilt at having once again squeezed the comforting blue hand within her own. “I feel like perhaps we should shift our contact or my hand may not survive the encounter intact. Do not be embarrassed. I speak in jest … mostly.”

Miranda’s heart rate picked up as the grip around her neck tightened slightly and Sha’ira eased them both together even more, placing the two cheek-to-cheek. She could feel the asari’s breath on her neck, and the voice inside her head suddenly seemed like nothing more than an intimate whisper of air in her ear. She tensed briefly yet again as an arm wrapped around her torso and pulled her closer. “Breathe, Miranda. Wrap your arms about me and hold on … Use it to remind yourself where you are … A physical reminder that you are with me, on the Citadel … You are not on Earth. You are not imprisoned.”
Miranda swallowed hard and took a shaky deep breath as she thought to herself, *I don’t know if I can do this.*

She felt a comforting squeeze from Sha’ira. *Of course you can. You are strong.*

A surprised Miranda blurted out, “You heard that?”

Sha’ira laughed openly and responded aloud. “Of course I did, dear. That is how a meld *works,* after all. Now, please …” [… focus on your memories of your captivity.]

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*A/N: This is an interesting chapter to me, as it is the first one in which my Beta reader (and now co-author) *Desert Sunrise* is a major contributor. DS’s own stories on this site *all* have significant interactions with the Asari race, so much so that I prevailed on DS to assist with the description of the meld between Sha’ira and Miranda Lawson. I feel the results in this chapter—and the next one—are far and away greater than anything I could have dreamed up on my own … I hope you agree.*
A Mantra in Blue

Murder, rape, torture, abuse. Are we ever able to truly understand the ‘why’ or do we simply yearn for labels and boxes to organize the chaos we can’t control? — Leylah Attar, The Paper Swan

♦ ASARI COUNCILOR’S HOSPITALITY SUITE, PRESIDIOUM · CITADEL ♦
♦ SUNDAY, 27 JANUARY 2188 ♦

After a few false starts, exactly as Sha’ira had predicted, Miranda was finally able to open her memories to the Consort and they both abruptly found themselves bunked in an abandoned office building, curled up under a desk because Miranda had been too worn out to bother finding someplace more comfortable. Miranda shuddered as she remembered trying to struggle awake in her exhaustion; she was unceremoniously yanked out of her hiding place by her ankles, only to feel a cold metal suppression collar get clamped around her neck as a needle penetrated her skin, sending her down into an irresistible blackness.

She had no idea how much time had passed before she woke in a dark room, her wrists cuffed uncomfortably tight behind her back and clamped to the base of the hard metal chair in which she was seated. She cried out and jerked her head back in an explosion of pain as a high intensity spotlight flicked on without warning; with her pupils wide open in an unconscious effort to see in the darkness, the searing beam lanced straight through her lenses, smashing painfully into her retinas before she could slam her eyelids closed. Her head instantaneously felt ready to burst and, even with her eyes clamped tightly shut, she could still feel the light burning into the back of her skull; she sobbed with the vividness of the recalled pain.

A soothing voice penetrated the darkness. {You are safe with me, Miranda. It is only a memory … a memory that has no power over you.} Sha’ira’s voice rang of truth and Miranda’s sobs faded quickly as she remembered where she was and rapidly drew in a relieved gasp of air; she leaned closer into the Asari’s body … a reassuring gentle warmth against her own, in sharp contrast to her memories of the chill of the interrogation cell and blazingly painful light.

{Good. Remember when you are. As you recall the memories, constantly remind yourself that is all they are … things of the past that have no power over you and can no longer hurt you.} Sha’ira’s arm contracted slowly so as to not surprise the human, pulling Miranda into a comforting hug as her hand massaged the tenseness from the back of the human’s neck; biotics played easily through the consort’s fingertips, enhancing their effectiveness. {Take whatever time you need to collect yourself and continue whenever you are ready, Miranda. We are in no hurry and have no time limits.}

The consort had opened the floodgates and Miranda couldn’t stop the flow of her memories. Her thoughts continued to travel down the path they had begun. The beatings soon began which, sad to say, were nothing she had not endured during her training in Cerberus … initially. She had no way to determine the passage of time, but assumed it was a daily routine—she was awakened and dragged to the interrogation cell, questioned and beaten mercilessly, each session more violent, carried out with an increasingly sadistic pleasure by the perpetrators. What happened afterward, however, was an entirely different story and well outside her wide range of experience; she was taken away … not always to the same place, but nearly always to the same fate. She had become … entertainment … for her captors. She endured yet more beatings or forced sexual intercourse; often both and occasionally at the same time.

Her body started to shake uncontrollably, even with Sha’ira’s comforting hold. In her memories,
Miranda was on her knees, forced into providing oral service for a rather large turian male standing before her. She was stretched upwards at the limits of her reach, as a short human male repeatedly beat her from behind with a baton. Even *that* she was able to endure, until the man let out a braying laugh and energized the rod in his hand. He did not swing the instrument … he simply slid the yet dormant rod up between Miranda’s bare legs and stroked it somewhat forcefully across her sex.

The male human grinned wickedly at his human play toy, extremely pleased at how this bitch so *erringly* believed she would be able to ignore his attentions … and tapped the activation button; the powerful jolt instantly contracted all of Miranda’s muscles and the turian suddenly howled in anguish as her jaw clamped down on his member. His talons lashed out, smashing viciously across her forehead and eyes in his rage, painfully separating her from his body … but the electricity coursing through her kept her rigidly upright and he was not satisfied with the punishment so struck her across the face a second time, smashing her nose and breaking several of her teeth.

The force of the second blow knocked Miranda to the ground, finally separating her from the male human’s torturous baton and, in her memories, she slumped thankfully into oblivion. The consort gasped as the recollection flooded into her mind; tears streamed down her face and she drew Miranda closer to her body in a supportive embrace, even as she helped her endure and sequester the horribly painful memory.

The morning dragged by in a sequence of similar events and afternoon eventually settled in, with the duo breaking several times for Miranda to regroup under Sha’ira’s watchful eye and caring tutelage. Together, as if in a shared nightmare, they relived every atrocity throughout the duration of Miranda’s torment at the hands of her captors; the recurring beatings, the bites that actually removed chunks of hide (batarians being particularly enamored of chewing on her breasts), the punches that broke bones, the near daily rapes. Through it all, Sha’ira stayed unfalteringly at her side and in her mind, comforting Miranda and reminding her it was in the past, all the while providing her with multiple ways to cope with the fear … the humiliation … the anguish.

It was when Miranda began to recall the hate … hate for her own advanced genetics, merged with the Reaper nanites coursing through her system—her physical injuries were being continuously repaired, which served only to prolong her agony—that Sha’ira understood this human had completely lost any *desire* for rescue. Bereft of all hope, Miranda simply wished to find a way to end it all. *‘Living’* Miranda’s physical pain and emotional suffering through the meld had been excruciating, almost beyond her endurance, but to feel the *complete* loss of hope that had led Miranda to wish for her own *death* was too much. Through all of her clients, Sha’ira had never been forced to endure such a sense of inconsolable loss and simply blurted out in protest, “By the Goddess, Miranda! *No!* **You must not!**”

After watching their wordless communion for so long, Yuán had started to doze off. When Sha’ira unexpectedly cried out, her voice ringing with deep despair, Xiùlán bolted upright out of her chair, her hand darting automatically to her side in search of her pistol. As she stared intently at the two before her, she felt like an intruder to an extremely private moment. Sha’ira had enveloped Miranda protectively in her arms as the human clung to her in quiet desperation, not unlike a tortured child clinging to a parent; tears streamed down both of their faces in silent testimony to an unfathomable shared pain. A faint biotic barrier shimmered around the twosome and Xiùlán found she could not tear her eyes away until she was confident there was absolutely nothing she could do but continue waiting. She mumbled an ancient Chinese curse under her breath as she settled back into the chair in an attempt to relax, while knowing she wouldn’t be able to do so again anytime soon.

Sha’ira’s and Miranda’s tears eventually slowed, then finally ceased altogether. Lawson’s recall had reached the point of the unlikely rescue by Yuán and her team from the *Hong Kong; that* experience and all that followed, including Yuán Xiùlán’s unceasing caring and patience since carrying her to
the stairs out of the building, had allowed Miranda much more than a glimmer of expectation that
she’d be able to live her life again … a new ‘normal’, even though she had been forever changed by
her captivity. *(This is why, no matter how dim the prospects, you must never again let go of hope,
Miranda Lawson.)*

Miranda clung to the asari in silent thanks for a few minutes longer, before finally opening her eyes
and gently, reluctantly pushing back. Sha’ira’s eyes returned slowly to their natural blue as she
leaned back against the couch in exhaustion. She smiled softly as she watched the expressions of
wonder, realization and finally … confidence … dance across Miranda’s face. The human was tired,
more so even than Sha’ira; the emotional strain had definitely taken its toll … but Miranda’s eyes
now held new resolve.

“I cannot *possibly* thank you enough for this, Shi.” Miranda looked almost adoringly at the asari
sitting beside her, not the least bit surprised by the newfound level of *familiarity* between them.
“You have given me an undeniably priceless gift today.”

Sha’ira, while extremely pleased with the day’s progress, was even more surprised at her own
uncharacteristic anger at the perpetrators; her customary detachment was a thing of the past. “I am
normally one for peaceful solutions, but their actions … all of them … are completely unforgivable,
Miri! No one, never mind their race or gender, should *ever* be a victim of the kind of treatment to
which you were subjected. It is beyond my ability to understand how *anyone* could be so …
uncaring, so … cruel.”

Miranda nodded, a troubled smile crossing her face as she spoke. “I know. But now, thanks to you,
I truly believe I can face the challenges before me and bring at least one of the guilty parties to
justice.”

Sha’ira pushed herself up from her slumped position against the back of the couch, concern coloring
her words. “Miranda. Please remember what I told you. What you went through is not so easily
fixed. I know how strong your mind is … but I have also seen the depths of your despair. You *must*
maintain the meditations I showed you; nothing so terrible as what you experienced can be fixed
with a single session, and repeated meditational mantras are *necessary* to maintain peace within the
soul.”

A quick look of amusement passed through Miranda’s eyes. “Yes, Ma’am. I promise.”

The freckles at the sides of Sha’ira’s eyes crinkled as she narrowed them in puzzlement before she
queried, “Are you … what is the human expression? … Are you *sassing* me, Miranda Lawson?”

Xiùlán had listened in almost *gleeful* silence to their repartee, amazed at how different Lawson’s
voice now sounded. It had a new fullness and confidence to it; the results of the session with Sha’ira
were even better than she had believed possible. The last bit of conversation broke her quiet
observation and the captain laughed out loud, the joyous sound suddenly reminding the two they
were not alone in the room.

Sha’ira was first to speak, not so easily flustered after centuries of life and intensive training. She
turned to Xiùlán with what could only be described as a sly grin. “Forgive us, Captain. After such a
prolonged and … *intimate* … exchange, it sometimes takes a while to remember others exist
alongside us in the galaxy.”

“Xiùlán!” Miranda’s face, on the other hand, was flushed with embarrassment as she turned quickly
to her comrade in arms and spoke. “I am so sorry … I should be thanking *you* as well, for
convincing me to come here today.” She shook her head as she continued, “I never would’ve
attempted such a thing without your encouragement.”
“And yet, here you are, giving your counselor a bad time, just as if you have known her forever!” Xiùlán rose and grinned at Sha’ira before taking the few steps necessary to stand in front of the consort. She reached out with her hands as she said, “Are you alright, Consort? From what I understand of asari physiology, you must be exhausted after what you just did.”

Sha’ira looked at Xiùlán for a brief moment before placing her hands in those offered by the human. “Thank you, Captain. It is true; yet, very few people realize how taxing an extended meld is for the one initiating the joining. I will admit to being quite tired. Perhaps you would contact Matron Shegos for me …” Sha’ira paused as she looked at Miranda, still sitting on the couch beside her, before continuing, “… for us. Some refreshments … some wine perhaps? … along with tea and …” here she glanced at Miranda, “… Kaffe would be most welcome about now.”

Xiùlán nodded once, then did something totally uncharacteristic for her … she leaned down further and embraced the consort in a gentle but heartfelt hug of gratitude; with her cheek against the warm, blue skin so recently touched by Miri, Xiùlán whispered in her ear, “Sha’ira, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for Miranda. You have my gratitude … and my respect.” She placed a quick kiss on Sha’ira’s cheek before releasing her hold and stepping back. Activating her omnitool, she sent the consort’s request for refreshments to Tevos’ assistant before sending a note to her own XO on the Hong Kong, letting him know that she and Miranda would be a bit longer before returning to the ship.

The asari gingerly raised a hand to her cheek in wonder. This human had been the subject of a meld before, most likely with Mallene Calis. For the very briefest of moments as their cheeks had touched, Sha’ira had ‘perceived’ a kaleidoscopic vision of thought and awareness, the likes of which she had only seen once before. She had not melded with the human – had merely experienced … what? … an aura? … for lack of a better term. There was an order to it all, elegant, structured, arranged … neatly … seemingly in rows and columns. “By the Goddess, Captain. You possess an extraordinary mind … almost … asari-like in its ability to arrange and order memories, both good and bad. The only other person I have ever encountered with such a strong mind was Commander Rachael Shepard, but unlike yours, hers was completely opposite—chaotic, restless, full of conflict when first we met. The images I perceived when I touched her mind were those seen only in the most terrifying of nightmares … the chaos of the Prothean generated Reaper vision dominated everything! I believe it’s what drove her, even after the defeat of Sovereign and the geth.

Xiùlán smiled as she returned her attention to the consort and replied in a soft voice, “Of my own aura, I was told nearly the same thing by Mallene Calis almost ten years ago on Mars, when I was still in an Alliance Special Ops school. I can remember …” Xiùlán paused, thinking back to that time. “… seems so long ago now, but I do remember how easy it seemed for Mallene to enter my mind. It was … a unique experience.”

“What was a unique experience, Captain?” Tevos had entered the room, followed closely by Huntress Tenir and Dalis Shegos; all three were bearing serving trays, one filled with the requested beverages, another filled with sliced fruits, vegetables and fish, while the third tray held glasses, plates, cups, saucers and eating utensils.

The trio carefully set the trays down on the large table in front of the couch and chairs as Xiùlán responded. “The time when I participated in a meld, with Mallene Calis. That was actually why I called her concerning Miranda.”

She looked at the food, then up at Tevos, who quickly responded with, “Oh, please help yourself, Captain … Miranda … do not feel you must stand on ceremony with myself or Sha’ira. It has been a long day for all three of you. These snacks will help you regain your strength, particularly you, Miranda.”
Miranda suddenly felt as if she hadn’t eaten in days. The nearly daylong effort to reorder and sequester the memories of her captivity by the Blue Suns had left her feeling exhausted and famished. She quickly grabbed a plate and utensils and helped herself to a selection of different fruits and vegetables; additionally, crackers, bread, bite-sized cubes of different cheeses and slices of smoked fish were available. Taking a seat in one of the chairs, she had to exercise a great deal of self-control to keep from looking like a ravenous animal as she ate.

Tevos smiled at Sha’ira. “Looks like you’re just as tired as Miranda. Eat something … you’ll feel better.”

“What about you, Raesia?” Sha’ira asked. “You need to eat as well, do you not?” She leaned forward and began loading a plate as she awaited the answer.

“You forget, the three of us were able to sit down for lunch.” Tevos did bend down in order to pour herself a glass of a rare honey mead, fermented by members of the monastery on Lesuss. She glanced up at Sha’ira in question—a subtle look in response and Tevos filled a second long-stemmed glass with a different beverage … Elasa. After handing the glass to the consort, she moved to the other chair while sipping from her own glass and continued, “It is now close to dinner time; I’m guessing breakfast is only a distant memory for you and our human friends.”

Xiùlán had fixed herself a plate with sliced vegetables, cheeses, crackers and fish. She placed a slice of fish on a cracker and after taking a bite, was quite surprised at the taste. It was a delicate white fish with a bit of a ‘tang’ she had not been expecting. After swallowing the bite she’d taken, she looked at her asari host and asked, “Madam Councilor, if I may, what kind of fish is this? It is exquisite, and my guess would be that it originated in the seas of Thessia.”

Tevos smiled as she took a sip from her glass and replied, “Good guess, Captain. Although we sometimes serve food native to other council worlds, all of these selections are native to our home world.” Tevos reached for and delicately picked out a slice from the serving tray. “This is maanru, a type of shoaling fish common off the coast of Armali … most humans find it a bit too pungent for their palate. The flavor is slightly offset by the trace of eezo permeating it … adds a bit of sharpness to its taste.”

Tevos glanced at Tenir as she added, “The other fish selection available is tuinnín, a much milder fish than maanru. Of course, all the food on the tray contains trace amounts of eezo, which will not harm your system, Captain. It would help Miranda’s, had she been using biotics.” Tevos paused to inspect Xiùlán’s food choices. “I hope you will also sample the mixed fruit salad. It is superb, if I do say so.”

Xiùlán nodded as she took another bite of fish. “Delicious. I can see I will need to take my next leave on Thessia in order to fully reacquaint myself with the food and drink there.”

“I am glad you are enjoying the food, Captain. Know that you and the crew of the Hong Kong are welcome to visit our world whenever you wish. Just notify us here when you wish to go and we’ll make all the arrangements in advance.”

“That is most gracious of you, Councilor.”

♦ SSV NORMANDY · DECK ONE, CAPTAIN’S QUARTERS ♦

Bill Cody was sitting at the desk next to the massive display of model ships belonging to Commander Shepard, looking through the various status reports concerning the upgrades and progress on modifications to the ship. He ‘scrubbed’ his face with his hands in a somewhat futile
attempt to fight off his need for sleep.

It appeared from all the reports that the modifications, such as securing the many power and communications cables that had been left on the decks and hanging loose from the overheads on all five decks, would be complete by the middle of the following week.

He expected that he would need to make a quick shake-down run, possibly to Earth and back, in order to be sure all the systems were working correctly and there’d be little to no chance of equipment failures once he put the ship to some serious work in the Attican Traverse and the Terminus Systems.

The ship’s complement was growing … in addition to Sandra Patton, he now had a replacement for Cortez’s old position as the ship’s shuttle pilot, procurement officer and arms master. His propulsion engineer would be getting an assistant to go along with her promotion, and Ken Donnelly would remain as systems engineer responsible for the safe operation of Normandy’s environmental equipment. A squad of Marines had been assigned to the ship and was busy with orientation and job assignments. There were also a number of Naval personnel coming aboard, consisting of specialists and petty officers; they were being assigned to various jobs entailing equipment operations and maintenance, something this ship had been lacking ever since its christening as a Cerberus-controlled frigate.

Cody had overseen the removal of all of Commander Shepard’s personal belongings, which had been cataloged and placed in cargo pods. Her armor alone took up an entire pod; the customized weapons, all Spectre gear, went into another. In all, six pods had been filled (or partially so) and were sitting together in the hanger bay, to be transferred under escort on Monday to Shepard’s apartment on the Silversun Strip.

Cody had talked to Shepard in regards to moving her gear—she had asked him to have Edi, along with either Captain Yuán or Specialist Traynor, accompany the pods to the apartment, since all three were familiar with where everything needed to go, including her armor and weapons.

The only items Cody had not packed away were the models and the sentimental collectibles—the journal belonging to Charles Pressly from the Normandy SR1 and her N7 helmet, both recovered from Alchera; her dog tags in the framed display given to her by Dr T’Soni, and the obviously expensive—and rare—chess set Aria T’Loak had sent from Omega. There was also the Prothean sphere recovered from Kopis. Cody had placed all these items in the alcove just inside the entry hatch, hoping to have them delivered to the apartment as well. The models were still in their display cases – and Cody suspected Shepard would allow them to stay as they were.

Cody was ready to call it a night and had almost powered down his terminal when it ‘pinged’ to indicate an incoming message. He grinned when he saw who it was from and opened the incoming message queue.

**ALLIANCE NAVY - INTERSHIP EXTRANET**

**FROM:** Warner, Reuben · Captain, SSV Shanghai  
**TO:** Cody, William · Captain, SSV Normandy  
**RE:** Personnel Transfer

*Bill: I just wanted to send you a personal note of thanks for the outrageous gift you sent along with the shuttle that spirited away my Gunnery Chief. Just in case Gunnery Chief Patton or your shuttle pilot, Lieutenant Sherri Morse, forgot or did not have a chance to do so, I wanted to personally convey my gratitude for your thoughtful gift and let you*
know I will pay you back for this. Fly Safe.

Reuben

♦ ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL · SUNDAY EVENING, 27 JANUARY 2188 ♦

The sleek, 8-passenger aircar settled softly onto the concrete dock between the bows of the Hong Kong and the Normandy; as their asari pilot throttled the engines back to zero thrust/zero lift, the canopy over their heads tilted up and the side panels opened.

Captain Yuán and Specialist Miranda Lawson exited their luxury conveyance and, having offered their thanks to their pilot for the ride, turned and strolled towards the Hong Kong’s entrance airlock.

“That has to have been the most interesting day I’ve had in … I don’t know, forever?”

Xiülán chuckled. “The main question I have for you is, can you face him in a court of law, Miri? When all’s said and done, will your memories cause you to crash when you’re face-to-face across a witness stand?”

Miranda crossed her arms as they walked towards the Hong Kong. “I believe I can answer any question they throw at me. I also believe that, now I’m healthy, I could beat the little bastard within a gnat’s ass of his life and he wouldn’t be able to touch me.”

Miranda gazed at the ground in contemplation as they walked. “I wouldn’t have believed spending a day with the asari consort would have helped me so much, Captain. I agreed to meet with her again for one or two shorter sessions of, perhaps two hours each. I can’t imagine what other suppressed memories she can dredge up, but I want to have my mind as clear and focused as possible. I owe Shepard that much, at least.”

A sudden idea came to Xiülán, one she hesitated to voice. “Miri …” Xiülán stopped walking and turned to face her new comms officer. “Please don’t take what I’m about to say in the wrong way. Is it possible … that you may still have some information …”

Miranda knew immediately what her captain was about to ask and interrupted her. “You’d like to know if I’m hiding other locations for Cerberus operations, right?”

Yuán looked down as a light blush of embarrassment colored her cheeks; returning her gaze to Miranda’s face, she nodded her head as she said, “I don’t believe you’re hiding anything, Miri … not consciously, anyway. That said, if there are any memories from that time you are unintentionally suppressing, they may be of great assistance in our hunt.”

“I’ll ask Sha’ira when I see her in a few days.”

“Good.” Xiülán resumed walking towards the Hong Kong. “And now, I’m going to have some of the mango pudding the chef made yesterday … care to join me?”

“Sounds good, Captain.”

♦ SSV NORMANDY · 0635 HOURS, 28 JANUARY 2188 ♦

Bill Cody leisurely rolled onto his left side, thoroughly enjoying the embrace of the several quilts and blankets in which he had been sleeping. The transition from blissful, dreaming sleep to cognizant wakefulness was gradual, beginning with the realization he was no longer on board the Hong Kong,
and he certainly wasn’t in one of the cookie-cutter apartments on officer’s row a short walk from the Alliance docks. He eased his eyelids open one at a time, just enough to squint at the chronometer on the bedside table … 0637 … Groaning inwardly, he slowly drew his knees up in what he knew from experience would be a vain attempt to lessen the increasingly difficult-to-ignore need to empty his bladder.

Cody moved his feet past the edge of the mattress and pushed himself, still mostly covered in blankets and quilts, to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He groaned again, this time audibly, as he looked at the empty desk in front of him and the tables by the couch. With the exception of a few pieces, he had moved all of Rachael Shepard’s personal possessions out of his new quarters over the past few days. He needed to talk to Shepard this morning, along with Edi, before he had her possessions transferred to her apartment in Tiberius Towers.

Thoughts about what that woman had endured before succumbing to the loss of air and heat in her suit made him shudder; thinking of the damage her body had sustained from its uncontrolled descent through the thin atmosphere of Alchera was something he preferred not to contemplate. Shaking his head, he got to his feet and moved towards the bathroom … his bathroom. Glancing at the model spacecraft and the dozens of fish as he walked past the office area on the upper level simply served to remind him of the previous inhabitant of these quarters.

After voiding his bladder, he stripped off his skivvies, grabbed body wash, a fresh washcloth, and took a quick shower, reveling in the amount of room available in which to move and the amount of hot water pouring out of the shower head. He quickly toweled himself off, wrapped the oversized towel around his middle and stepped up to the sink, where he shaved off a days’ worth of stubble with a small laser razor.

Using his hands, he splashed hot water and hand scrubbed his cheeks, chin and neck to rinse the skin before splashing on a bit of lotion. Satisfied, he removed the towel and hung it up to dry, then left the bathroom for his sleeping area where he unhurriedly got dressed, choosing to wear his SDU today. He checked the bedside chronometer again. 0654. Enough time for a cup of coffee and a spot of breakfast before his private meeting with Edi Coré and Commander Shepard.

♦

ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL · 0745 HOURS ♦

Tali’Zorah vas Normandy had never seen so much refined eezo in one place in her entire life. She stared at the glowing pile, somewhat enthralled by the ever-shifting luminosity of the material behind the kinetic barrier being generated on the Alliance dock at the end of Dreadnaught Row. Tali glanced at the lone occupant of the dock, moored far away from the rest of the Alliance vessels—Žiuk’Durhmah, the Reaper that had transported the Normandy back to Alliance-controlled space—the primary reason Harbinger and Esiz’Qür had retrieved such a massive quantity of eezo from Earth orbit.

Tali had been inside Žiuk’Durhmah with Samantha Traynor when Javik, in a final hate-filled attempt to destroy a Reaper, had uploaded a virus into the vast servers responsible for regulating the containment field surrounding the massive eezo core providing power for Žiuk’Durhmah’s entire existence. Before they left Žiuk’Durhmah’s structure, Tali and Traynor had rigged a temporary power source to keep his cognitive functions alive, his memory intact. Steve Cortez had then managed to fly the three of them over to Harbinger, where Traynor and Tali had remotely ejected Žiuk’Durhmah’s entire core before Javik’s virus caused the containment field to collapse; this had an effect similar to a star going supernova—an explosion of catastrophic proportions. Now, connected to Citadel shore power and monitored by the keepers, Žiuk’Durhmah continued to exist, dreaming the dreams that could only be known to his alien mind.
Harbinger had contacted Tali through a text message on her omnitool, after which he had uploaded the schematics and specifications needed to construct a throttling magnetic containment ‘bubble’ for the eezo needed to power the giant construct. As they needed to construct it from ‘scratch’, it could be made larger than the original structure, nearly as large as the one inside Harbinger himself. Tali had contacted Admiral Hackett and Samantha Traynor as soon as she received the specs.

The keepers had started the manufacturing process—there were even a number of them crawling around inside the massive compartment where the core containment structure would soon be assembled. Tali’s omnitool trilled to announce an incoming audio message from Traynor, which she immediately answered. “Samantha! How are you?”

“Fine, Tali,” came the wry answer. “Apparently, I should have received a promotion to lieutenant or commander or … something … I seem to be so indispensable I cannot finish my thirty-days leave.”

“I’m sorry, Samantha. I just wanted you to have all the information as it’s received … you’re not being asked to cut your leave short,” Tali replied. “The Keepers have begun performing preliminary work—procuring materials and manufacturing some of the smaller parts—for the containment structure for Žiuk’Durmah’s new eezo core. Thing is, the materials they’re using don’t look like anything we’ve ever seen. They look like …”

Traynor interrupted, “… Reaper material? The metals we’ve seen inside Žiuk’Durmah?”

“Exactly! I don’t know where they’re getting their materials, either.” The puzzlement in Tali’s voice was obvious. “I cannot imagine there’s a lot of this metal just sitting around the Citadel.”

“Did Harbinger or Esiz’Qür bring back any sections of the destroyed Reapers? … because that would be a perfect source for the materials needed. It might even be worth exploring the cores remaining in these destroyed Reapers, Tali. Could be a way to get Žiuk’Durmah re-powered quicker.” Traynor paused to think about the problem, all aggravation at having to discuss ‘work’ while on leave quickly forgotten. “Talk to Harbinger … he should be able to tell you which method would be faster.”

“Harbinger and Esiz’Qür recovered a colossal amount of eezo from Earth orbit, Traynor. There’s a huge quantity of refined eezo sitting here on the dock, behind a kinetic barrier. Harbinger had the additional eezo placed in a parking orbit near the Citadel. I believe they’re getting ready to go back for more.”

“Then I better let you go so you can talk to them … find out if they can bring back an ‘engine’ section of one of their dead … associates.”

♦ SSV NORMANDY, CAPTAIN’S QUARTERS · 0805 HOURS ♦

Edi Coré touched the haptic lock on the hatch leading to Captain Cody’s quarters, actuating the announcement chime inside the compartment. After a few moments, the lock indicator changed from red to green, allowing the hatch to retract into its recesses. A man’s voice called out from within, “Come in, Ms Coré … come in.” Cody moved into the center of the lower level so he could be seen. He held up his mug, used it to gingerly invite her down to the lower level. “Please, join me. I’d offer you something to drink, but I am really unsure if that is proper protocol here.”

Edi smiled as she entered and walked down the two stairs past the model display cases and aquariums. “You may simply call me Edi, Captain. As for refreshments, thank you for offering, but I require nothing to drink at this time.”
“Okay, Edi,” Cody responded. Motioning towards the couch, he said, “Have a seat. I have some questions I hope you can answer … about this ship, and about … Commander Shepard.”

“Certainly, Sir,” came the ready response as she took a seat on the couch and nestled her back into the corner closest to the pressure hull. Crossing her legs, she asked, “Is there anything in particular you need to know about the Normandy, or do you just need answers to some general questions?”

“General questions first. How was your trip to Earth and back? I read your report, but you never actually revealed if you could or could not feel the Normandy while you were light years from the ship.”

Edi tilted her head slightly to her left. “I never actually lost the feeling of the Normandy being ‘with’ me while I was on Earth. Perhaps it is due to Shepard’s influence in the server. The ship’s … presence, for lack of a better word, was always in my lower priority consciousness. I felt I could access the servers at any time, even while under fire, and my request would be answered. That being said, I did experience a heightened sense of anxiety once through the Charon relay.”

Cody nodded at this, replying in a low voice, as if to himself, “Sounds like you can safely operate away from the ship, even if you’re not in the same system. Other than taking care of Rachaél Shepard’s mental needs in the server, you may not need to live aboard this vessel continuously, but I would like to see you perform another trial excursion, sooner rather than later.”

“That would seem to be a prudent course of action, Captain,” came Edi’s response.

Cody poured himself another cup of coffee from the carafe he’d brought up earlier from the kitchen/dining area before taking a seat on the end of the couch closest to the aquariums. “Are you capable of operating this ship, Edi? Independent of anyone’s intervention, that is?”

“Only when I was a hundred percent in the servers. Now? … I would be able to navigate and pilot the ship by myself, but I would need to be … plugged … into the servers to replace the organic crew.” Edi paused for a moment before continuing. “To expand on that answer, Commander Shepard does have the capability to fly and fight this vessel by herself. She quickly became what Major Alenko feared when she first revealed she was in the computer—an evolved OI—an organic intelligence without peer, possibly not even equaled by the Reapers themselves.”

Cody’s face must have betrayed his surprise, though he said nothing at first. After mulling it over for several moments, he said, “I’ve never actually had to ask for her presence. How do I summon her?”

Edi smiled for the first time since entering the compartment. “Simply call for her, Captain. She is always listening to what goes on in the ship.”

Cody’s mouth fell at this revelation, before openly asking, “Commander Shepard?”

The response came back almost immediately through the overhead speakers. “What may I do for you, Captain Cody?”

“Given the fact you are everywhere in this ship at all times, how is it possible for me, or anyone, to obtain any personal privacy, Commander?”

“Simply make a verbal request, Captain,” came the ready answer, albeit with a snarky tone. “I will cease all active monitoring of whatever compartment or area you are occupying, for any duration you specify.”

“How will you know when to resume monitoring an area if I don’t specify a duration?”
“I continue to monitor the ship for use of my name—a little sub-routine I developed early on. I don’t have to actively listen to conversations to detect the syllables that form my title or either of my names. The safety of this vessel and everyone in it is my primary concern, Captain, so I am never further away than my name being said aloud. Realistically, I cannot foresee a time when monitoring confidential meetings or clandestine hookups will be a problem for anyone on board.”

Shepard chuckled as she continued, a sound that surprised Cody. “Wait, you can laugh? How in hell is that possible?”

“Edi already told you … I am Major Alenko’s worst nightmare come to life—a fully evolved organic intelligence. I am alive in every way you can think of, Captain, except for a physical body. I’m simply confined to the server on this vessel. As for my capabilities, I am unable to monitor the restrooms thanks to Tali and Edi … they disconnected and removed the audio/video pickups installed by Cerberus and left in place by the Alliance.”

Cody felt a bit self-conscious, but asked anyway. “You said clandestine hookups? Not that I would, but just for the sake of argument, if I did have a lover up here for the night …”

“… Automatic cessation of monitoring the loft, Captain,” Shepard interrupted. “I am most certainly not a voyeur.”

Detecting a shift in the direction of Shepard’s audio, Cody stood and looked up towards the compartment entrance in time to see Shepard’s image coalescing on the upper level as she continued speaking, “… I make an extreme effort to respect everyone’s personal privacy … and their dignity … at all times,” she continued as she ‘walked’ down the stairs. “That means I won’t suddenly appear while you’re walking around in here wearing just your skivvies … or less.” The projection paused as it appeared to slowly look Cody up and down. “I expect you are no differently equipped than any other human male, Captain. That said, unless you have a krogan quad or a previously unreported tattoo, I have seen it all … you have no need to feel shy in my presence.”

Cody’s cheeks reddened as he took a hard look at Shepard’s image, just to be sure he wasn’t looking at a hologram of a real, live, breathing human. “I … ah–h–h … okay. I expect that I won’t be seeing you before I’ve had breakfast in the morning, right?”

“As you wish, Captain. What other questions did you have for me … or Edi?”

Cody stroked his chin, then waved at the souvenirs in the alcove aft of the aquariums. “What would you like me to do with your dog tags, helmet, that hovering globe? Want me to send them over to your apartment along with your possessions?”

Shepard looked thoughtful for a few moments before responding. “I had feared my helmet and dog tags had been irretrievably lost … thank you for finding them.” After a few moments spent looking at the items in the alcove, she continued with, “Captain, this is your new home. As previously discussed, all of my models can stay where they are. Everything else can be moved to my apartment with my clothes, armor and weapons … Liara will want them, should it prove impossible to put me back into a real body. Just leave the pods in the entryway, if you wish; or perhaps Edi wouldn’t mind putting it all away for me.”

“Fair enough,” Cody smiled. “Don’t know when I’d have a chance to build replacement models anyway. That floating globe? What is that thing?”

“Retrieved from a Prothean dig site on Kopis, one of the moons orbiting Makhaira,” Shepard responded. “Not sure what it is or what it does, exactly … had to take out barrier generators while dodging fire from rocket drones to get to it.” She paused, thinking back. “Seems so damned long
ago! All the researchers were dead, including Dr O’Loy and Dr Cayce … it appears they were both indoctrinated, but there’s no way to truly be sure. I encountered a similar object on Eletania in 2183 … apparently a device to gather information.” Shepard spoke softly, as if to herself. “It allowed me to relive a part of the life of a primitive human from ancient times. Javik mentioned once that all their research on primitive life was terminated when the Reapers invaded the galaxy.”

“What about that fancy chess set? Looks expensive.”

“Well, it cost General Oleg Petrovsky a lot more than he bargained for,” Shepard snarked. “It was a gift from Aria T’Loak after I helped her retake Omega from Cerberus.” Shepard appeared to think about the mission for several moments before continuing. “Give it to Specialist Samantha Traynor … I’m sure she’ll get more use out of it than I ever will.”

“Okay.” Cody looked to Edi. “I’ll make the arrangements to get all your stuff over to the apartment. Edi can accompany the corporal … once there, she should be able to put all your clothes and personal possessions away in an orderly fashion.” He opened his omnitool, typed a few commands, then shut it down and turned back to Shepard … or rather, Shepard’s projection.

“Thanks for taking the time, Commander. Edi? If you would, I’d like you to meet Corporal Andrews on the hanger deck … have him bring a transfer pod up for the loose items in the alcove, then accompany him to Shepard’s apartment … make sure her gear is stowed and secured.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, Sir.” Edi rose from the couch, nodded towards Cody and Shepard, then walked up the steps and left the compartment.

Cody retook his seat on the couch as he looked at Shepard’s image. “Commander, what exactly do you intend to do when we reunite you with a cloned body?”

“Sir? I’m not sure I understand the question, and what makes you so damned sure I can even be joined with a cloned body?” Rachael’s image appeared to lean against the desk at the forward end of the couch.

Cody chuckled as he shook his head. “Commander, you’ve been declared KIA, not once, but twice! Me? … I like to maintain a positive attitude. Unless you’re going for the trifecta here, I believe you will walk the decks of this ship again, and I plan to do everything in my power to see that happen. So, what are you going to do? Retire in rank? Remain a Council Spectre?”

Shepard’s projection appeared to gaze at the deck beneath her ‘feet’. “I haven’t thought … no, scratch that. I have given it some thought.” Her voice turned wistful as she continued, “I’d like to retire to Thessia with Dr T’Soni, see if we can make one or two, maybe even three little blue babies in whatever time I have left.” Rachael looked back up at Cody. “I’m tired of always having to be in charge, Bill. I’ve been fighting since I joined the Navy at the age of 18. I’d like to do something else for a change, be part of a creative process instead of always destroying.”

Cody nodded his head as he said, “Sounds like an admirable goal. I don’t know if there are any asari with human DNA, but I can only believe it’d be a benefit to their race as a whole. I hope I’m still around when the first of those blue babies is born, Commander.”

Cody stood and stretched. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have to change into my blues … there’s a promotion I need to preside over right after lunch.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, who’s the lucky person?”

“Gabriella Daniels … she’s going to become a Senior Chief Petty Officer, Propulsion Engineer,”
Cody replied with a smile.

“CPO to SCPO Daniels? I cannot think of anyone more deserving, Captain.” Shepard stood and allowed her image to slowly dematerialize in a swirl of blue and red pixels as she concluded, “She’ll do a great job for you.”
Questions Without Answers

_The power of the harasser, the abuser, the rapist depends above all on the silence of women._
— Ursula K. Le Guin

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_NCOIC:_ Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge

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♦ C-SEC HQ, CITADEL · MONDAY, 28 JANUARY 2188, 0925 HOURS ♦

Commander Armando-Owen Bailey looked up from the several datapads he had been studying as the entry door opened to admit a man in civilian clothes, who approached his desk as he inquired, “Commander Bailey?”

“You have my name … now who might you be?” This man’s face was familiar, but …

“Alenko … Kaidan Alenko. I left the ‘Major’ off on purpose. For the sake of this visit, refer to me as ‘Spectre’ Alenko. I understand you’d like me to accompany you to the Alliance detention area … something about questioning a captured murderer … a member of the Blue Suns?”

Bailey stood as Alenko approached his desk and stuck out his hand, to have it firmly clasped by the second human Spectre ever appointed by the council. “Pleasure to meet you, Major … and … I’ll not use _that_ title once we’re out of this office.” Bailey retook his seat as he waved the Spectre to a chair in front of the desk. “So, did Captain Yuán fill you in on what I need you to do?”

“She did,” came the ready answer, “and I’m still not sure how much help I can be.”

“If the man is half the coward I believe him to be, he’ll spill his guts long before you have to employ _any_ strong-arm tactics. I haven’t been able to see him since the captain managed to disable and capture him. He doesn’t have an advocate yet, and I’d like to talk to him before that changes.”

Bailey selected a datapad from the stack on his desk and handed it to Alenko. “The captain said the Alliance considers him a terrorist after the attempts he made on Miranda Lawson and herself. Whether done at his bidding, directly or indirectly, it doesn’t change the fact he’s a stone-cold killer.” Bailey’s expression hardened as he continued. “He attacked a squad of my men—killed several, put a number in hospital—makes him guilty of crimes against the security arm of the Citadel Council. That he joined the Blue Suns _after_ the Alliance discharged him marks him in my mind as a terrorist as well.”

Alenko stroked his chin between fingers and thumb of one hand as he read through the list of offenses. “Guy’s got quite a history, Commander. _Surely_ there’s enough on him to put him away for the rest of his natural life, isn’t there?”

“I wish I was so sure, Spectre. The shit this guy has done, I don’t want there to be any chance a slick-talking advocate can get him off on a technicality.” Bailey’s voice was nearly a growl. “When we go in to visit him, the vid and audio feeds need to be turned off. This will be a strictly ‘off-the-books’ meeting, and we sure as hell can’t leave a mark on him.”

Kaidan wanted to know, “Why can’t we just summarily execute him? Martial law is still in place, right?”

Bailey frowned. “Uncle’s a big-shot general back on Earth. He didn’t object when General Park
drop-kicked his nephew’s ass out of the Alliance back on Mars in 2179, but I expect he’d throw a fit if his sister’s only son was used for target practice while tied to a stake.”

Alenko leaned back in his chair as he thought about the problem. He finally looked up at Bailey and said, “This guy is a really fine example of everything that’s bad about humanity. Looking at the transcripts,” he waved the datapad above his head, “I can only agree with General Park’s assessment, and really? … it appears he hasn’t changed in the intervening years. I honestly cannot understand how he managed to make it as a Blue Sun without some batarian or turian ripping his head off and shoving it up his ass.”

Bailey rubbed his cheek and chuckled. “I’d almost pay to see that happen. I guess we better go interview him … or attempt to interview him, before a batarian or turian can get to him to do just that. Come on … I’ll give you a ride over to Alliance lockup.”

♦

SPECIALTY SHOPS NEAR THE ALLIANCE DOCKS · CITADEL

Engineer Ken Donnelly had given a lot of thought to what he was about to do, but now that he was actually inside a jewelry store, staring at all the rings, necklaces, earrings and bracelets, he could tell he was getting cold feet.

Ken was in love with Gabriella Daniels, of that he was certain; he believed she was in love with him as well, although neither of them had ever said as much to each other. He had made a dinner reservation for them at a restaurant featuring Scottish and English cuisine, where he intended to declare his love for her and propose marriage, once he’d had an after dinner scotch … or two … to settle his nerves.

He had paused at a display case featuring engagement rings and bracelets, intrigued at the selection of delicately crafted gold, platinum and silver bands featuring polished stones of various colors set within. Within one display case he discovered what appeared to be an ancient looking design, a bracelet cuff of intricate Celtic-inspired silver wire work with three blue-toned rainbow-colored moonstones.

The salesman retrieved it from the case and allowed Ken to examine it. It was quite heavy, heavier than it appeared, and was meant for a wrist with some developed muscle and sinew under the skin. After watching Gabby working out on Lieutenant Vega’s heavy bag these past several months, he knew this bracelet—a cuff, the salesman called it—would fit her nicely, just as he instinctively knew Gabby would love it. Ken asked the salesman to place it in its presentation case, then activated his omnitool and transferred the credits to the store.

Heading back to his apartment, he thought, Noo ah juist need tae git thro’ dinner …

♦

SSV NORMANDY, DECK THREE · 1005 HOURS

Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton had just finished polishing her dress shoes for the third time since last evening, and was getting into her dress blue trousers with scarlet ‘blood stripes’ down the outer seam of each leg, plain white blouse and blue jacket. The promotion ceremony for her and Gabby Daniels was going to be presided over by Admiral Steven Hackett, and Sandra wanted to look as professionally correct as possible. Checking her image in the mirror, she turned slightly to the left, then back to the right; satisfied, she checked the chronometer for what seemed like the twentieth time since breakfast. She really wanted to make a good impression on Captain Cody, as well as Admiral Hackett; both had vetted her for the higher pay grade and position.
Chief of the Weapons Systems Division had actually been an unfilled position during the Reaper War; although Garrus Vakarian had done an exceptional job of keeping the turian-designed Thanix cannons properly calibrated and in better than top shape, he had also been assigned to ground teams—mostly in conflicts with Cerberus—so did not have the time necessary to devote to the Normandy’s other weapons systems—the Javelin disruptor torpedo launchers and their payloads, and the array of GARDIAN point defense lasers used against enemy missiles and fighters. She would also be responsible for maintaining the mass accelerator cannons mounted on each of the two UT-47a Kodiak drop shuttles carried by the Normandy, along with the turret mounted 155 mm cannon and machine gun on the M35 Mako the Normandy would begin carrying prior to being deployed. Finally, although the Marines and Navy personnel on board would be responsible for maintaining their own weapons, she would be the ‘point person’ for anyone needing parts for repairs or performance upgrades.

Satisfied with her appearance, she sat at the small desk and activated the terminal to catch up on her correspondence. She first sent a note to Captain Warner on the Shanghai, giving her written endorsement for promoting her friend Cassie Harper to Sergeant, along with outlining Harper’s qualifications for the increased responsibility and higher pay grade. Patton hoped it would help … Cassie really deserved a promotion.

She sent a separate note to Cassie, not saying anything about her note to Captain Warner; rather, telling all about her own new assignment and of how the Normandy felt so much smaller inside than she’d imagined it would be.

After sending her notes, she left the crew compartment and walked to the small kitchen area for a cup of coffee; mug in hand she turned towards the tables, almost running headlong into Zaeed Massani as she turned. “Oh, my gosh! Massani! You have got to quit sneaking up on people that way … you were almost wearing this coffee!”

“No ‘arm done, sweetheart. You’re sure dressed up pretty fancy dis fine morning … Going ter a party? Be awright if I join you?”

Patton looked down for a moment, then firmly glared, “Zaeed, I would really, really appreciate it if you would either refer to me as ‘Gunny’ or ‘Master Guns’ after the promotion ceremony.” Taking a seat at the closest table, she sipped her coffee then finished with, “Failing that, simply use my last name … it’s Patton, in case you’ve forgotten. It most definitely is not ‘sweetheart.” Since she hadn’t refused him, he sat opposite her at the table and fixed her with his left eye as she asked, “Why are you even on this ship? I expected you to be ensconced in a bar somewhere in London, drinking the place dry … or attempting to.”

Zaeed chuckled; the sound reminded Patton of an old, rusted out concrete mixer with too much gravel in the tub. “You should know why I’m ‘ere, darlin’ … It was you what tracked me down in London, innit? Fuckin’ ‘ell, Gunny … I’m gonna ‘elp the Alliance ‘unt down Vido Santiago an’ dat miserable batarian bastard Solem Dal’Serah. I get close enough, I’ll kill bof ov ’em with me bare hands!”

Patton rolled her eyes as he said darlin’, but didn’t interrupt. “So, if you know where these two criminals are located, can’t you simply go kill them yourself? Why do you need the Alliance?”

“She Alliance came ter me fer help. They wan’ da bastards dead as well, but they also wan’ da entire organization dead. Pretty tall order, ya ask me. Gonna be a tough job ter rid the galaxy ov da lot o’them, ’pecially now da war’s done.” Zaeed looked down for a few moments before adding, “Won’t be sorry ter see ’em gone, Luv … Not sorry a damn bit!”

Sandra carefully finished her coffee and stood to leave. “Okay, Massani. I hope we can put an end
to them as well.” Setting her cup in the rack for washing, she added, “Time for me to go … Admiral Hackett’s going to preside over a couple more promotions, mine included.”

Zaeed rose to leave as well and replied, “Okay, den. Good ter see you ’ere on da Normandy. Glad I talked ter Cody about you.”

Patton’s replied evenly, “Yeah, Captain Warner told me as much before I left the Shanghai. Question is, why’d you do it? Why would you want me on the Normandy?”

“Pointed out da Normandy didn’t ’ave a weapons tech since Garrus Vakarian left,” came the answer. “Told ‘im he needed someone, so I suggested you fer da job.”

“Let me see if I understand this, Massani.” Patton felt the beginnings of a really bad headache starting at the back of her skull. “You … a civilian with no real standing in the Alliance … a mercenary, för craps sake! … talks to the captain of the Normandy and recommends me as the new NCOIC of the Normandy’s weapons systems, just from having met me on Earth?” Patton was now sure of that headache. “What the hell? You don’t know me from any other grunt! Why say anything at all?”

“All I did was give him your name, sweetheart. Captain pulled yer records, vetted you, knows ya can do da job, plus you’ll be another ground-pounder, wiv rank enough ter lead a squad. Win för you, win for da Normandy.” Massani added the next sentence wistfully, as if to himself … “Might even be a win fer me.”

Sandra’s mouth fell open in surprise. “A win for you? What in hell makes you think my being on this boat could be of any possible benefit to you, Massani?”

Zaeed looked down at his feet, suddenly unsure of himself. “It’s like dis, Patton. I been a loner all me damned life …” looking at Patton again, he continued, “… never worked wiv anyone on a job after leaving da Blue Suns … well, not since I brought down da Verrikan, turian frigate da Shadow Broker wanted crashed. There was an asari, name of Tristana. We ‘ad a past … I broke it off before it got me killed … anyway, as I said, been by myself fer a long time.”

Sandra was intrigued, in spite of herself. The grizzled old merc was opening up about his past, something she instinctively realized he rarely, if ever, did with anyone. “So, you obviously lived to tell the tale. What happened to Tristana?”

“Killed ’er before she could kill me.” Zaeed rubbed the massive scar on the right side of his face as he thought about that time, nearly twenty-five years ago. “Didn’t work wiv anyone again, ‘til Cerberus hired me ter work with Commander Shepard ter help take down da Collectors. She went on a mission ter Zorya with me first … was supposed ter ’elp me kill Vido at da Eldfell-Ashland refinery. Instead, she turned on me, clocked me in my face fer daring ter set me own bloody agenda!”

“You might tell Gunny Patton why I didn’t approve of that course of action, Zaeed … give a bit of context to your tale, or shall I tell her the story from my perspective?” Shepard’s standing image had coalesced at the far end of the table, surprising Patton and Massani. “Hello, Gunny. Good to have you aboard.” Startled and surprised, Patton stood and stared at the image of a legend. “Sorry, Patton … didn’t mean to alarm you. Cody did tell you I was alive in the Normandy’s servers, didn’t he?”

“I … well, I don’t … Damn, Commander! That’s really you, huh? I’d heard you’re still …” Patton trailed off, unsure of what to say or how to say it.

“… I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘alive’, Ms Patton.”
Patton’s cheeks colored slightly as she replied, “It’s really nice to meet you, Ma’am.”

“It’s okay, Gunny. Not sure what I would say to a ghost if our positions were reversed. You should have seen the crew when I first returned.” Directing her attention back to Massani, she finished with, “Go on, Zaeed … tell Patton why I had to bloody your face.”

Zaeed looked down at the deck. “She ‘it me ’cause …” bringing his head back up, he cast an angry one-eyed gaze at Shepard, “… I started a fire in da refinery … was gonna let their employees burn while I caught an’ killed Vido.” His countenance one of intense unhappiness, he concluded, “It was yer go’dammed fault Vido slipped away that day, Shepard! Twenty fuckin’ years ov trackin’ the bloody bastard, up in smoke … gone! We wouldn’t be havin’ dis conversation today if you’da done the go’dammed job my way!”

Shepard surprised Patton by remaining calm in the face of Zaeed’s heated accusations. “Doing the job your way, Zaeed? Letting those people die … burn to death? I told you then there’s always a better way.” Shepard crossed her arms and walked up to Zaeed. “Vido Santiago may have eluded you that day, but I was damned if I’d trust you on my team if you wouldn’t obey my orders, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to condone a bunch of collateral deaths just so you could satisfy your need for revenge.”

Patton was amazed to see a smirk on the image of the commander’s face as she continued in a snarky tone, “As to having this conversation today, you almost fried your own ass by ejecting that overheated sink into a pool of flammable liquid. I suppose it’s fortunate for both of us I didn’t need to leave you to die on Zorya; you have another chance at Vido, and this time the Alliance is going to help you do the job.”

Zaeed studied the image in front of him for several seconds before nodding his head once. “You’re right, Shepard. I didn’t like it then, but we got da Collector mission done an’ lived ter tell da tale. Now I’ll get to kill Vido, and I’ll kill Solem Dal’Serah for good measure, no extra charge. Lookin’ forward to finishing it.”

“That’s good to hear.” Turning back to Patton, Shepard said, “Gunny, I’ll be the first to congratulate you on your promotion, but you’d best be getting out on the ramp. Hackett’s shuttle is due to touch down in less than five minutes.”

Sandra looked at the chrono on the wall and let out a little squeak. “Thank you, Commander … I’ll return shortly.” As she turned to leave, she glanced at Zaeed, smiled and said, “Nice talking with you, Massani. Looking forward to hearing more about your life as a merc for hire, maybe over a couple of beers when I’m off duty.” With a quick nod of her head, she left for the elevator.

Zaeed watched her leave with an admiring eye. “Glad da Normandy ’as a weapons tech again, Shepard … and she’s a ’ellova lot nicer ta look at than Garrus Vakarian’il ever hope ta be.”

♦ ALLIANCE DOCK C-6, BERTHS 02 & 03 · 1045 HOURS ♦

The crew of the Alliance frigates SSV Hong Kong II and SSV Normandy had assembled outside the hanger bays of their respective vessels. Although most of the people from each vessel were officially on leave, most had elected to attend the ceremonies about to happen between the two vessels.

Alliance Marine Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton, newly transferred to the Normandy from the cruiser SSV Shanghai was going to be promoted to the rank of Master Gunnery Sergeant, to become the NCOIC of the Normandy’s Weapons Systems Division.
As the ship’s propulsion engineer, Chief Petty Officer Gabriella Daniels would be receiving a promotion to Senior Chief Petty Officer, based on a recommendation by the Normandy’s new executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Greg Adams. Gabby would still be in charge of the propulsion systems, but would be supervising three new propulsion engineers, a Petty Officer First Class and two Petty Officers, Second Class, all newly transferred to the ship—the long hours she had spent monitoring the parameters on everything from H3 turbopump pressures to intercooler temperatures to performance of the eezo core would be a thing of the past for Gabby, allowing her to concentrate her efforts on fine-tuning the entire system instead of continuously having to be on call during her ‘off-duty’ hours to make repairs to a broken coupling or bypass a recalcitrant coolant pump.

Gabby saw Patton stride down the hangar bay ramp and walked over to introduce herself. “You the new weapons officer? Welcome to the Normandy. Gabriella Daniels,” she said as she stuck out a hand. “You can call me Gabby.”

Patton smiled as she took Gabby’s hand and responded, “Sandra Patton. Nice to meet you … Gabby. What’s your assignment on the ship?”

“I’m the propulsion engineer … been on board since it was christened by Cerberus. Got to help Commander Shepard eliminate the Collectors, then spent six months in an Alliance lockup for giving aid to the enemy. Shepard used her Spectre status to get myself and engineer Ken Donnelly reinstated with full back pay and benefits. Been on the ship ever since.”

“You worked with Cerberus?” Patton was amazed at this. “They were a group of terrorists, Gabby … enemies of the Alliance. Why go to work for them?”

“Begging your pardon, Ma’am, but that’s all bullshit, concocted by the brass to cover for them not doing a damn thing to protect our colonies in the Traverse. The Alliance brass and the Citadel Council all claimed Shepard’s beliefs concerning the Reapers were crazy … that she was delusional. Ken and I left the Perugia after being approached by Cerberus. Council called ‘em terrorists as well, but Cerberus was the only organization willing to take on the Collectors.” Pausing for a moment as she thought back to that time, she added, “We nearly died after getting grabbed by the soulless bastards.” Gabby started to tear up as she concluded, “Shepard and her squad rescued us from their ship, got us back to the Normandy … destroyed their ship and destroyed their base … We … Ken and I … owe our lives to the Commander.”

Patton could tell the engineer was still a bit haunted by what she had seen and experienced. “I’m sorry, Gabby. I didn’t know. Guess the Alliance isn’t going to be very forthcoming about what they actually knew beforehand, huh? And who’s Ken … he a friend of yours?”

“Oh, Ken Donnelly.” Gabby looked around at the sound of a shuttle approaching its landing zone. “Ah … there’s the admiral’s shuttle.” Gabby smiled at Patton. “Ken’s my best friend on the ship … he’s an engineer also … oversees the ship’s environmental and power systems.” As Hackett’s shuttle touched down, Gabby parted company with Patton, saying, “Let’s get together for lunch after we get done here. I can even take you on a tour of the ship if someone else hasn’t done so already.”

“Thanks, Gabby. I’d like that.”

♦ ALLIANCE SECURE PRISONER HOLDING AREA, CITADEL ♦

Commander Bailey and Spectre Alenko were ushered into an interview room for their meeting with Jason Joesiar, the person accused of several attempts to murder both Miranda Lawson and Yuán Xiùlán. Bailey wanted to talk to him about an explosion in a Blue Suns controlled warehouse in an
outer neighborhood of Delta Ward—Industrial Networked Control… InNetCo—a front for Blue Suns’ activities in the district.

Bailey’s officers had first encountered hostile mechs. In the intervening weeks, C-Sec’s lab techs had traced the origins of the destroyed mechs to Omega Station; since the Council had banned anyone from having operational mechs on the Citadel, the cost to import them had soared to the point where only large corporations could afford them.

One of his squads, led by Sergeant Esilaro, had entered the warehouse and was methodically clearing a number of large rooms, eliminating mechs as they progressed. Unfortunately, the last room they entered was a trap—the entry door had been rigged to lock when it closed, trapping Esilaro and his men. The incendiary device they discovered exploded; despite the best efforts of Private Vic to set up a dampening field, the blast killed two squad members and seriously injured everyone else.

The two men ceased talking and stood quietly side-by-side at the back of the room; the access door on the opposite wall chirped a warning, then silently slid open to reveal two Alliance guards standing on either side of their prisoner. The man was shackled by chains, ankles to waist to arms; the chain to his arms was attached to the middle ring of a pair of rather robust wrist cuffs.

The guards led Joesiar, shuffling due to the ankle restraints, up to the wide, stainless table in the center of the room and pushed him down to sit on the short bench. The guard on the left held Joesiar’s arm as the one on the right unlocked a wrist cuff, ran it’s free end through the large, ‘∩’-shaped ring protruding from the middle of the table and relatched it on Joesiar’s left wrist. Both guards then retreated out of the room and closed the door.

Alenko and Bailey each took a seat across the table from Joesiar, who sullenly studied each of them in turn. Looking at Bailey, he observed “You’re C-Sec. I ain’t gonna say a fuckin’ word to you, man.” Directing his gaze to Alenko, he asked, “And just who in ’ell are you? Don’t look like no lawyer ta me. Ain’t gonna talk to either of you assholes wifout a lawyer here.”

Alenko had taken an instant dislike to the pasty-faced miscreant as soon as he had shuffled into the room; he forced himself to smile as he replied, “Good guess … I’m not a lawyer, Joesiar. And who I am is unimportant. You need to understand something. You’ve been classified a terrorist by the Systems Alliance and by Citadel Security, so you’re not going to be seeing a lawyer … at least not in the foreseeable future. The Alliance can hold you incommunicado for up to six months before they formally charge you, and you … Will. Be. Charged! … With the attempted murders of numerous Alliance personnel. With kidnapping. With torture, including rape. With conspiracy to murder Alliance personnel, including a general on Earth. Oh, and there’s the matter of the deliberate murder of an Alliance Private in Huerta Memorial, name of Hamilton. Plus, destruction of Alliance property.”

Bailey took over for Alenko. “There’s also the infiltration of C-Sec by turian members of the Blue Suns, and the bombing inside an InNetCo warehouse in the outer zone of Delta Ward. Killed two of my men, severely injured several more. Thing is, the person that set that bomb off was too much of a coward to face us. So, neither one of us is here to be your friend, Joesiar.”

“Don’ need your kind as friends, ol’ man. Take these chains off, I’ll show you who’s a coward.”

Alenko slowly stood and eased himself around the table, his every move watched suspiciously by Joesiar. “I’m going to stretch my arms a bit.” Coming around behind Joesiar, he quickly grabbed Joesiar’s shirt collar under his right ear and pulled it away from his neck. “Looks like the remnants of a Blue Suns logo tattooed on his neck, Commander. Makes him guilty by association.” Kaidan released the shirt collar and continued walking behind Joesiar. “You know, I’ve heard you’re a
pretty good shot with a sniper rifle … is that true?”

“Like I already told you, I got nothing ta say.”

Alenko looked up at the camera in the corner by the ceiling and confirmed to himself it was inoperative as requested. Checking the camera in the opposite corner nearest him, he noted it too was turned off.

“Oh, I think you’re only brave when you’re beating up a defenseless woman, Joesiar. I’ll just bet you’re not able to even do that unless you have a couple of your buddies holding her down.”

Alenko came up behind Joesiar; speaking in a low voice, he said, “Are you familiar with the Council Spectres, Joesiar?”

“I heard ov ‘em. So what?”

“Are you aware they have total freedom to deal with problems, not unlike yourself, that cannot be solved through normal means?”

“Again, in case ya didn’t hear me, so what”

“So, I’m a Council Spectre, Joesiar. If I choose to do so, I can arrange for you to leave this room in a body bag, and there’s no one in the galaxy that can stop me … not even your beloved General Uncle, whose name you only seem to invoke when you’re in too deep a pile of shit to extricate yourself without help.” Alenko got close enough to Joesiar and whispered, “I can kill you, Joesiar, and no one will think twice about it. But that’s not why I’m here. I want you to tell me and the Commander there everything you’ve been up to since General Park booted your ass out of the Alliance Navy on Luna.”

Joesiar was still defiant. “Told ya, I ain’t talking.”

Alenko had finally had enough. “I was really hoping you would be reasonable, Joesiar. Too bad …” Alenko moved back around the table, raising one arm as he stopped to stand by Bailey; with a faint glow of blue surrounding his arm and hand, he pointed at Joesiar to apply a bit of biotic lift, causing him to rise off the chair. Since he was chained to the table, he could only move a short distance before reaching the limits of his shackles.

Joesiar grunted as he came up short against the cuffs around his wrists, then cried out, “Yew can’t do this! I ’ave rights! Aaahhh! Dammit, that fuckin’ ‘urts! Put me downnnn!”

Alenko responded by increasing the power he was applying to the biotic lift, heaving Joesiar bodily into the air, shackled feet towards the ceiling; the only thing keeping him from flying away was the weight of the heavy table to which he was chained.

Joesiar was all but crying now, pleading for Alenko to please stop hurting him, to please put him down, to please let him live.


“I don’t know, Spectre. I haven’t heard him say anything about the actions he committed that landed him in here.” Bailey looked up at a face that was rapidly turning purple. “What about it, Jason? You ready to talk to me?”

Between terrified screams of pain, he managed to gasp out, “Yes! I’ll talk! I’ll talk!” Joesiar gasped for breath, then cried out, “Anything! Anything! Just make ‘im set me down, please! He’s killin’
still had never felt pain this intense. He didn’t know which would be torn off first—his arms at the shoulders or his hands from his wrists. He continued screaming as Alenko closed his hand into a fist, shutting off the dark energy keeping the man suspended in the air; unfortunately for Joesiar, this resulted in his immediate head-first crash back onto the surface of the table, where he lay crying and slobbering for several minutes until Kaidan grabbed him by the shoulders and sat him back in his chair.

Still defiant, Joesiar gasped out between cries of pain and humiliation, “I’m gonna report dis! … Nothin’ I say will be believed now! … You can’t just torture a confession outta me! … I know my rights.”

Kaidan retook his seat, the faint blue of biotic power surrounding his body. “You just said it yourself, Joesiar. Nothing you say will be believed. And I sincerely doubt that you’ve been hurt nearly as bad as you injured one of your victims. Remember a woman you held captive on Earth? You and your friends beat her to a bloody pulp.” Kaidan brought his open palm forcefully down on the table, the biotically enhanced sound that of a thunderclap to Joesiar’s ears. “Do you remember?”

By now, Joesiar had calmed down a bit. Wiping his nose and mouth on the shoulder of his coveralls, he snuffled, “Yeah, I do remember ‘er. Had a lot o’ fun wit’ ‘er, too. Kinda woman a man could really enjoy! Nice big ass to hang onto for breedin’ … nice tits! …” He trailed off as he contemplated the memories from that time. “Had ta slap ‘er aroun’ a bit … messed ‘er pretty face up for ‘er.”

“I’m pleased you remember her in such detail,” Kaidan said, his voice pure ice. “She sure as hell hasn’t forgotten you, or what you did to her in Vancouver. Your beatings cost her an eye; that, the scarring on her face and her testimony in court about multiple assaults and rapes should make getting a conviction and a death sentence for you relatively quick and easy. Oh, and by the way, she’s an Alliance officer.”

“She weren’t Alliance when I … I mean, she was dressed in rags when …” Joesiar shut his mouth when he realized he’d played right into Alenko’s hands.

Bailey interrupted with, “You’re going to pay with your life for your crimes against the Alliance, Joesiar … your uncle cannot prevent that from happening. Might as well admit you were behind the explosion in the InNetCo warehouse, otherwise, when I return to talk to you again, I’ll bring Master Sergeant Esilaro along with me. Turian … big fellow. Never seen or heard of him harming anyone out of spite or revenge, but I don’t think he’s fond of human xenophobes, either. If I happen to slip up, mention that you’re the reason his backplates were mostly burned into his skin, he might just settle the account then and there.”

Joesiar shifted his sullen gaze between Bailey and the Spectre, still glowing blue with suppressed biotic energy. “Didn’ have nuthin’ ta do wif dat warehouse. I like a lotta distance. Dat’s why I use a scoped rifle.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve again before saying, “Maybe … jus’ might know who set off dat e’splosion. Was a batarian what done it. May even know ‘is name, iff’n I can keep my life.”

Bailey looked at Alenko before replying, “In your dreams, ya little bastard. I won’t cheat the Alliance out of giving you the punishment you deserve … I’ll find the guilty person without you.”

Bailey stood, walked around the table and banged on the door with his fist. “Guards!” As Alenko stood, the door opened and Bailey told the guards, “Get this piece of trash out of here.”

Joesiar let out a laugh. “My huncle’ll get me outta dis place … jus’ you wait.”
Alenko and Bailey left the way they’d entered, the sound of a braying donkey echoing in the room behind them. “Really think he told the truth about a batarian setting off that explosion, Spectre?”

Alenko rubbed his cheek with one hand. “Hmmm. No reason for him to lie. On the other hand, he’s a known xenophobe. Don’t know how in hell he managed to stay alive as a member of an organization that hires so many batarians and turians.” He sighed as he walked with Bailey. “I do believe him when he says he prefers a long gun … man’s a sniveling coward, Commander. He doesn’t have big enough balls to get handgun close … might get hurt. I’m going to ask Captain Yuán to meet me—she’s had some experience with him in the past—may be able to gain some insight into his thinking.”

“Does he really think an Alliance General is going to bail him out of this mess?” asked Bailey.

“We all grasp at straws in desperate situations, Bailey.” As they reached the C-Sec aircar, Alenko added, “Unfortunately for Joesiar, I believe he’s all out of straws.”

♦ SSV NORMANDY, DECK THREE · 1005 HOURS ♦

Newly promoted Alliance Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton had just finished the grand tour of the SSV Normandy, courtesy of Engineer Gabriella Daniels, also newly promoted to the position of Senior Chief Petty Officer. “So, what do you think, Master Guns? Is she everything you envisioned?”

Patton could see Gabby believed the Normandy was the best frigate in the Alliance Navy, and decided to comment on the one thing that Gabby felt was the best part of the ship. “I have never seen such a huge drive core stuffed into such a small space! Damn thing must really be fast.”

“It is!” Gabby’s face spoke volumes as she added, “Still wasn’t fast enough to outrun that damned energy wave … but it’s nice to know the core remains stable with such an enormous demand placed on it.”

Sandra grinned. “Ship’s weapons systems will be interesting to me—I’ve heard a lot about the Thanix Cannon, but I’ve never seen one up close. Guess that’s about to change, huh?”

Gabby’s grin grew even wider. “You are in for a real treat, Master Guns … I saved that compartment for last.” Looking around in the mess area, she commented, “I was really hoping Commander Cortez would stop by, since you’ll be answering to him.” Bringing up her omnitool, she sent a quick message, then finished with, “He should meet you here in a few minutes. I’m going to head back to my apartment ashore. Talk to you later, Ms Patton.” Gabby shook Sandra’s hand, then headed for the elevator.

♦ SSV HONG KONG II, DECK TWO · 1230 HOURS ♦

Captain Yuán had just returned to her quarters on the Hong Kong when the terminal on her desk began flashing and chirping, indicating a high-priority incoming message from Admiral Hackett. She keyed the device on and answered, “Admiral? What may I do for you?”

“Captain, I need you to deliver a package to General RaeLee Park in Vancouver. The Hong Kong can set down at the base if needed, but I’d personally feel better if you sent a squad of Marines down in a shuttle. The package will be delivered to you within the hour … courier is a Corporal Hobe. He’ll have a transit ID with him, along with a passcode.”
Hackett paused to look at his datapad before continuing. “Bring him onboard under guard and keep him isolated until you get his passcode verified by the JAG office ashore. Even then, he is to remain under guard the entire time he’s on your vessel. From Earth orbit, your Marines will accompany him to see General Park; Hobe will open the case in their presence and personally hand the paperwork and datapads to her. She will sign for the delivery, and your people will accompany Hobe back to the Hong Kong, where he’s to remain under guard until you’re docked back at the Citadel.”

Yuán was a bit amazed at the security requirements. “I’m not questioning the instructions, Admiral, but having the man under guard every second he’s with us seems a bit excessive, in my view. Doesn’t he work for the JAG office?”

“He does,” Hackett replied. “The instructions come from the JAG. I’m sending a copy of his personnel file, so you can check his record and compare him to his photo when you see him. Go ahead and get your ship ready for departure.”

“Yes, Sir,” Yuán replied. As soon as she terminated the connection, she activated the comlink in her ear and spoke over the ship’s PA system. “All hands, prepare for immediate departure. Specialist Lawson, issue an immediate recall for any crew currently ashore. Lieutenant Cross, I need engines hot in fifty-five minutes.” Without waiting for acknowledgements, she quickly changed out of her dress blues and pulled on her SDU, noting as she did so the slight increase in noise level and vibration through the hull as engineering began ramping up the output of the fusion reactor while increasing the power being applied to the electromagnetic containment field surrounding the Element Zero core.

Xiùlán had just left her quarters and was walking towards the stairs when Miranda’s voice came through her personal comm. “All crew members ashore have responded and are returning to the ship, Captain.”

“Acknowledged.” Starting up the stairs, she added, “I’m on my way up.”

Exiting the stairwell onto the command deck, she stopped for a few moments to watch the beehive of activity her instructions had stirred up. Miranda was entering data into a terminal and speaking over the comms system while keeping the ships’ status up to date; Staff Lieutenant Cross was remotely monitoring the engineering compartment as the reactor and eezo core were being brought online. Technicians were at their stations in the tactical passageway between the CIC and bridge, where Flight Lieutenants Spencer and Hall were engaged in performing their pre-flight checklists.

Stepping onto the raised platform behind the galaxy map, she selected the Charon Mass Relay as an interim nav point and Earth orbit as their final destination, then placed the nav system in standby mode. “Ms Lawson, instruct the crewmembers still ashore to reenter the ship through the hanger deck. Lieutenant Cross, secure the main airlock and have Corporal Vic and five Marines standby at the hanger ramp. A courier from the JAG office will be coming on board, and he’s to remain under guard the entire time he’s with us. I’ll be down there in a few minutes to greet him as he arrives.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

Xiùlán’s omnitool trilled to indicate an incoming message; opening the interface, she noted it was the personnel file promised by Admiral Hackett. A quick look at the bold-faced headings for education and background in the Alliance were enough to raise mental alarms. This Corporal Hobe was the very same person that had attempted to restrain Samantha for Joesiar at Alliance Base Luna … an attempt that cost him bruised testicles and a broken nose.

The only thing that had saved him from a fate similar to Joesiar’s was Sammy’s insistence the guy...
was a ‘follower’ … someone adrift without a close acquaintance to look up to, to try to emulate. Fortunately for Hobe, his need for strong leadership had been addressed—Alliance instructors washed him out of the program prior to the class being transferred to Mars for more advanced training. There were a lot of vocational roles a person could be trained to fill; apparently, the Alliance had trained Hobe as a diplomatic courier.

Still, the fact he had not advanced past the rank of corporal since the spring of ‘79 spoke volumes to Xiülán. She was quite tempted to call Traynor to come down to the docks, but still had too much to do getting the ship ready to fly. She sighed inwardly as she touched the comlink in her ear in order to audibly monitor the activity on the bridge … as she was no longer the ship’s XO, she was not actually required to monitor anyone except her replacement, Staff Lieutenant Cross, but old habits were hard to leave behind.

Speaking softly, she said, “Lieutenant Cross … Sit-rep, please.”

Cross’s voice came in over the chatter she was hearing from the bridge. “Pre-flight sixty percent complete, Captain.”

“Any problems I should be aware of?”

“No Ma’am.”

“Very well, XO … carry on. I’m going down to the hanger deck to personally greet our passenger.” She could feel the Hong Kong coming to life in the railings around the galaxy map and the decking under her feet as she turned and headed for deck three.
In the search for truth, every answer is merely the start of another question. — Jordan Baker, A Broken Throne

Note: Garrus and Liara’s conversation when ‘suited’ up, as well as anything received through a comlink on the Hong Kong, is depicted in italics. Iringü-Ebízkur’s speech is enclosed by single angle brackets [ ] and written in underlined italics.

♦ HONG KONG II · HANGER BAY ♦

Captain Yuán stalked out of the elevator into the forward hanger bay before the door segments had completely retracted into their recesses. She noticed several crewmembers jogging towards her from the open ramp—actually, towards the elevator behind her—returning from the docks and going to either their duty stations or their quarters. She also saw the six Marines standing easy at one side of the ramp so as not to impede any of the crew still returning to the ship; Corporal Vic, apparently watching for his captain’s arrival, stepped away from the group to meet her.

“Haven’t seen anyone out of the ordinary, Ma’am,” he said. “Only people coming aboard so far are returning crewmen, and we’re due to launch in thirty.”

“They’ll be here, Corporal,” Yuán replied confidently. “It’s just a shame that one criminal is the cause of all this fuss. On the other hand …” Xiùlán paused as she looked around the hanger, “… it’ll do us all good to make a short trip, see how we work together with the change in personnel.”

Vic chuckled as he replied, “Can’t see how it’ll be much different, Captain. We have you, a new XO and a new Comms officer, and only the Comms officer is new to the ship and crew. Not enough difference to worry about, ’specially since you always ran things before.”

Xiùlán smiled at this. “You may be correct about that, but I fully intend to emulate Bill Cody’s approach to commanding this vessel. XO Cross will basically be running things. I’ll be covering his six, but the day-to-day operations will be his responsibility.”

Anything the Corporal was going to say in reply was cut off as the sound of boots hitting the metal surface of the ramp drew their attention. “Here we go …” Vic said as he rejoined his squad.

Yuán walked forward to meet the JAG personnel as the three men stopped at the top of the ramp and came to attention. “Detail from the Alliance Navy JAG office reporting for transport, Ma’am.” said the Sergeant on the right.

Yuán asked, “You have a passcode for me, Sergeant?”

The man reached into a small pocket on the left leg of his SDU; he pulled out a half-size datapad, thumbed the device on and handed it to her. “All the information you were promised is on this datapad, Captain.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Stand easy.” Yuán glanced at the digital readout at the rear of the hanger bay. Seeing seventeen minutes until scheduled launch time, she touched the comlink in her ear and said, “Ms Lawson, please come see me on the hanger deck.”
While she waited for Miranda, she composed and sent a text to Asharru, asking him to accompany the Hong Kong to Earth orbit. Thinking *It’ll be the second trip there for both of us,* she wondered how the staff at the Vancouver base would view a former enemy construct flying in formation with the Hong Kong or its shuttle.

Miranda exited the elevator as Xiülán completed sending her message. “Specialist? Please take this datapad to your work station and send the passcode to the JAG office ashore. Request an immediate confirmation from the duty officer listed there and inform me as soon as you have it. I would like to get underway in …” she glanced up at the large chrono above the doors, “… fifteen minutes.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am,” came the prompt response. Miranda took the datapad and quickly moved back towards the elevator just as the ships PA came alive with her XO’s voice: “All personnel, scheduled departure in fifteen minutes. All department heads, submit status reports to the XO within five minutes.”

A few minutes later, Miranda buzzed Yuán’s comlink and reported, “JAG office ashore confirms the passcode and identities of our passengers, Captain. They are who they claim to be.”

Yuán answered quietly, “Very well,” as she returned her attention to the three men on the ramp. “Sergeant, the JAG office has requested that we have our people accompany you while you’re our guests … Corporal Vic and his squad will be your escorts.

Glancing to her left, she said, “Corporal Vic, if you would be so kind as to show our guests aboard?”

“Yes Ma’am. Gentlemen, right this way, please.” Vic led the way as his squad followed and formed a loose cordon from the ramp to the docked shuttlecraft. Yuán followed the group, stopping a meter and a half in front of the JAG courier. He was certainly the same person she remembered always hanging around Joesiar at Luna Base. “Corporal Hobe. Didn’t expect to ever see you again.” She paused as the flicker of unhappy recognition slowly dawned in his eyes. “Good to see the doctors on Luna were able to set your broken nose so it’d heal in a straight line.”

“Oh. My. God! It is you, ain’t it?” It was plain to Yuán why Hobe hadn’t advanced any further in rank in the intervening years. “What the hell? You’re a captain now?” The amazement in his eyes was readily apparent.

Corporal Vic immediately stepped between Yuán and the disrespectful courier. “Son, when you speak to my Captain, you will address her with the respect she deserves, or so help me I’ll give you a lesson in proper military protocol that you will never forget! Do I make myself clear?”

The sergeants standing on either side of Hobe frowned at this, but said nothing … this corporal was well within his rights to dress down the courier for his disrespectful attitude.

Hobe’s defiant glare instantly vanished as Vic stood his ground, the intent in his statement more than obvious. “My apologies, Corporal,” Hobe reluctantly ground out. Looking past Vic at Xiülán, he added, “No disrespect intended, Ma’am. Won’t happen again.”

Xiülán frowned as Vic stepped aside. “Took a lot of hard work for me to get to this point in my career, Corporal. And you? How’d you wrangle your way onto this detail? … I can’t imagine you volunteered for it.”

“I didn’t … volunteer, that is,” Hobe replied, his dislike for the woman in front of him still a bit apparent. “I was assigned to this trip, just like any other courier job. No big deal.”

The sergeant that had given Yuán the datapad spoke up, saying, “Begging yer pardon, Ma’am, is
there a problem here? We do these jobs all the time, so I don’t understa …”

Yuán cut him off with a look and said, “Sergeant, I have a friend, a specialist on the Normandy, that would remember Corporal Hobe here quite well. She had to instruct him in the proper way to treat a fellow serviceman when we were on Luna.”

“That was then, Captain. I got kicked outta the program thanks to her,” came Hobe’s unhappy retort, before quietly adding, “Guess I sorta brought it on myself for trying to…” His voice trailed off as he thought back to what he had done to earn his broken nose.

“Hobe, I’m not here to debate the merits of your expulsion from that program.” Xiülán’s frown deepened as she added in a glacial voice, “The person that’s really to blame for your expulsion, besides yourself, is the reason you’re getting a ride to Vancouver with that case chained to your wrist. You must remember Jason, Corporal. Jason Joesiar?”

Hobe’s chin dropped, a look of amazement on his face. “I haven’t thought about that … sonovabitch … since he got booted from the Navy, Ma’am … and I certainly have had no contact with ‘im since that time!”

“Were you aware he joined the Blue Suns shortly after his departure?”

The look of amazement deepened. “I was definitely not aware of that, Captain. I mean, he never even said ‘goodbye’ when he left. Guess he didn’t really get a chance.” Yuán could tell Hobe was being truthful … he really wasn’t aware of Joesiar’s actions after his departure from Luna Base.

“You know, Samantha Traynor may … or may not, have had something to do with your expulsion from the program, but she did fight tooth and nail to keep you from being kicked out of the Navy. She didn’t believe you, or Tatum, or Rosemont, were misogynistic racists or xenophobic … certainly not to the degree Joesiar was, and still is.” Xiülán nearly chuckled at the memory, but maintained a straight face. “He is certainly in a class all by himself!”

Hobe was as surprised at this as he had been about Joesiar joining the Blue Suns. “I really did not know that, Captain. I’ve been blaming Traynor all these years for my run of bad luck after I was forced out of the program. She honestly fought to keep me from being discharged from the Navy?”

Xiülán nodded as she replied, “Joesiar was to blame for being a bad role model for you and your friends, Hobe. Traynor didn’t feel any of you deserved a dishonorable discharge because of his bad influence.” Yuán looked intently at the man as she queried, “So, was she correct? … About you, I mean?”

Hobe wilted under her intense gaze, stammering, “I think so … Well, I’d like to believe … Do you think I’m anything like Joesiar, Captain?”

“I don’t know. Are you capable of kidnapping? Or torture? How about rape? Perhaps cold-blooded murder?” She watched Hobe’s eyes grow wider with each question.

Nearly speechless, he held up the case he was carrying and managed to ask, “Is that what this is all about, Captain? And you think …” Staring questioningly at Xiülán, he gave up, waiting to see what she would do.

“No, I don’t expect you’re capable of any of that.” Shaking her head, she concluded with, “When I see Traynor, I’ll be sure to tell her I ran into you. She’s ashore, on leave from her job on the Normandy.”

“Oh, please!” Hobe was not happy at the prospect of seeing Traynor again. “You really don’t need
to do that, Ma’am. Just forget you saw me here, okay? I don’t need her to finish what she started.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that, Corporal. Traynor isn’t one to hold a grudge.” Yuán motioned to Vic, who walked close beside her as she headed for the elevator. “Corporal, under no circumstances are any of those three to leave the holding area without escort … and, even then, only if they need to use the facilities.”

Vic looked at her with a curious expression but only said, “Yes, Ma’am,” before returning to his squad. Yuán walked into the elevator and leaned against the side for the short ride up to Deck Two, where she took the stairs up to the CIC on Deck One.

“Lieutenant Cross. Please close the hanger access ramp and post an armed guard at the bottom of the command deck access stairs.” Checking the chrono in her control console as he acknowledged her orders, she released the nav system from standby mode, then looked at Cross. “Lieutenant, you may depart the docks as soon as we’re cleared to leave.”

“Aye-aye, Captain.” Cross had a giddy grin plastered on his face as he touched his ear to activate the comlink and said, “Flight Lieutenant Spencer, you may initiate standard departure procedures at your discretion.

“Bridge, initiating departure procedures, aye, Sir.”

As the subterranean thrumming from the nadirs of engineering grew faintly in volume and the deep bass sounds from the H3 turbo pumps intensified, felt more as vibrations in the decking than actual sound, Xiùlán reflected on the significance of this launch—her very first departure from … anywhere—as Captain of an Alliance warship. She had to admit, it did feel different. Captain Cody had ceded most of the ship’s operations to her during his tenure as CO, so she was certainly no stranger to operations and commanding a crew, but … now that she was at the top of the ship’s command chain, all the blame would fall to her if anything went wrong. It was a lot of responsibility.

The viewscreen at her position in the CIC allowed her to see the entire ship from the tail-mounted camera as the Hong Kong began sliding backwards under Spencer’s gentle touch. She saw the Normandy, still docked on their starboard side, appear to shudder in the invisible distortions from the waves of heat being discharged by their primary thrusters as the HK2 cleared the obstacles around her.

Spencer brought the ship smartly around and shifted the directional thrust to aft as he pointed the nose out towards the vast, empty space within the five arms of the station. Having already received clearance from Alliance Control, Flight Lieutenant Wendy Hall slaved the ship’s navigational computer to the Citadel’s master flight control computer. The Hong Kong began accelerating the instant she engaged the coupling, its actions now controlled with more precision than any organic pilot could achieve.

Spencer reported to Lieutenant Cross’s comlink, “CIC, Bridge. Ship is under way. Widow Relay in fifteen minutes.”

“Acknowledged.” Cross looked back and up at Xiùlán, standing at the galaxy map. “Bridge reports we are under way … Widow Relay in fifteen, Ma’am.”

“Very well, XO.” Xiùlán’s nervousness had vanished.

The chime of her private mail server interrupted her thoughts with an insistent sound. Touching the switch to answer the device revealed an expected message: ›Yuán-Captain. This Repository is
pleased to be able to accompany Hong Kong-frigate through the relays once more.

She quickly replied, “Thank you, Asharru. Your presence is welcome.” Returning her attention to her XO, she asked, “Lieutenant Cross, is the relay aligned for transit to Charon?”

“Yes Ma’am. Sent the ship’s mass and destination as we were making ready for departure.”

“Very good. Carry on.” Xiùlán sent a final message to Asharru as they continued to move towards the relay, informing him he would need to quickly setup his own passage through the relay; his reply was not unexpected.

“Yuán-Captain. This Repository has alerted the relay of my intentions. It will accommodate Hong Kong-frigate and my own mass with no difficulty.”

Cross touched his comlink for a moment, then reported, “Relay ten minutes out.”

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant. I’ll be in my quarters … Signal me when we reach Mars orbit, please.”

♦ INSIDE THE DESTROYER REPOSITORY IRINGÛ-EẞIZKUR ♦

“Iringû-Eẞizkur, please set course for the Anadius System. We need to find whatever remains of the Cerberus facility known as Cronos Station—it was supposedly orbiting the sun outside the asteroid belt.” Garrus Vakarian thought back to the view that had greeted him as Iringû-Eẞizkur entered the Horse Head Nebula; he had instructed the massive Destroyer-class Repository to proceed to Anadius, the dying star about which the former headquarters of Cerberus was (he hoped) still in orbit. That sun was currently centered in the view finder he was observing, growing larger by the second, until it nearly filled the entire viewing surface. “Iringû-Eẞizkur, arrest you forward motion and begin scanning for any debris in the system.”

“As you request, Garrus Vakarian.” Iringû-Eẞizkur went silent for thirty seconds, the flashing green indicator on the comm speaker the only indication she was still online. Her answer came sooner than expected, but her message could not have been more welcome.

“There is a small debris field approximately 6.5 billion kilometers from the mean surface of the star. The debris surrounds a 9.24 Km long structure, at which I will arrive in seven minutes.”

Garrus rose from his comfortable chair and moved around the bulkhead dividing the observation lounge—as Liara had christened it—to Liara’s work area, where she continued to toil as the Shadow Broker. She looked up as he approached, her eyes studying his rocket-scarred face. “Garrus? We’ve arrived?”

“Iringû-Eẞizkur should be arriving at the station’s remains within minutes, Liara.” Pausing to think for a moment, he added, “Even if the structural integrity of that station hasn’t been compromised by the pounding it took during the Alliance assault, how would we get over there? We don’t have a shuttle, and I certainly don’t wish to free-float over in an environmental suit.”

“We’ll think of something, Garrus. Let’s just take this one step at a time for now.”

“As you request, Garrus Vakarian … Liara T’Soni … The structure known to you as Cronos lies thirty meters directly ahead. My scans of the interior detect no organic life signs.”

Liara had a thought that chilled her. “Iringû-Eẞizkur, can you scan for non-organic lifeforms?”

“I do not understand.”
“Mechs … Mechanical guards, Iringù-Ébizkur, or Geth, perhaps.”

Standby… Iringù-Ébizkur subjected the station to a more intense interior scan, the strength of which might have proved lethal to any organic survivors within. There is a ninety-seven percent probability there are no non-organic lifeforms within the station.

Garrus asked, “What about the other three percent, Iringù-Ébizkur?”

Impossible to determine. For example, Geth may reside as programs in a server while their mobile platforms are stored in an inactive state. I am unable to detect them under those circumstances, thus the three percent uncertainty concerning Doctor T'Soni’s query.

“How may we board the station, Iringù-Ébizkur?” Liara asked. “Can you provide a boarding passage to an airlock?”

Station power level is low; however, internal temperatures and atmosphere are within safe parameters for asari and turian survivability. After a brief pause, she continued, Once inside, the automated systems will detect your presence and increase generator output. There are three airlocks arranged vertically at the mid-line of the station … each would allow access to a different level within the structure.

Liara voiced her concern as she looked up at Garrus. “We need to take a look inside that place, Garrus. Shepard’s after-action report indicated the station, with the exception of the Cerberus soldiers deployed against them, was virtually deserted by the time they left. Even the Illusive Man had left, probably for the Citadel.”

After a brief pause to think, she asked, “Iringù-Ébizkur, what about entering through one of the hanger bays?”

Iringù-Ébizkur quickly replied, There is insufficient space within the main hanger deck for me to enter; I will have to land on the outer hull over an airlock access hatch. Once anchored to the outer hull, I will extend a boarding conduit and seal it to the hull; this will provide you safe passage into the station. I am currently fifty meters from the entrance I propose for your use.

Liara looked at the view of the nearly square-shaped hatch Iringù-Ébizkur was sending to her monitors, mentally noting the lack of illumination one would expect to be outlining such an access. “What about interior lights, Iringù-Ébizkur?”

Interior illumination should automatically increase to normal levels as more power becomes available. Kinetic barriers across the hanger openings should re-energize as well, allowing interior environment atmosphere and temperature to return to normal … estimated time required: seven to nine hours. Warning! Artificial gravity levels in most areas of the station may also be low.

“Your concerns and warnings have been noted, Iringù-Ébizkur,” Liara replied. Looking at Garrus, she said in a quiet voice, “You know what Shepard would do, right Garrus?”

The turian chuckled, the sub-harmonics adding a slight edge to the sound. “Yeah! She would go in there, turn on the lights and set out to explore the place, poking every button she could find … and you know how much trouble that always led us into!”

“Goddess.” Liara looked down for several moments as memories of some of their missions flooded through her mind; she finally lifted her head to flash a knowing grin at the turian before returning her gaze to the vid-monitor in front of her. “Iringù-Ébizkur, proceed with your docking maneuver. We
will be ready to board as soon as you have latched onto the station and secured a transfer tube.”

> As you request, Dr T'Soni. <

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**CHARON MASS RELAY • SOL SYSTEM**

The *Hong Kong* appeared as a pinpoint light against the blackness of interstellar space and rapidly slowed to sub-light velocity as it drew abreast of the rapidly rotating core containment rings. The ship remained on its course as another bright speck of light appeared in the distance and rapidly grew to reveal a Destroyer-class Repository, wreathed in massive electrical discharges of blue as it appeared to instantly decelerate, following close behind the Alliance ship. As soon as Asharru had cleared the space-time corridor, the *HK2* made a course correction to place it on a trajectory for Earth orbit and initiated the jump to FTL, closely shadowed by its companion.

The trip to Earth was quick … just over an hour at a moderate multiple of light speed. As they passed the orbit of Mars, Lieutenant Cross messaged Yuán. “*We just passed Mars orbital distance, Captain. Decelerating for orbital insertion to Earth.*”

Yuán was on her way to the CIC as she replied, “Barriers to maximum, XO … still a lot of large chunks of debris around the planet.”

“*Max barriers, aye, Ma’am.*”

As Xiùlán walked past the projection well for the galaxy map, she said, “Mr Cross, with me.”

Cross locked down his terminal and quickly followed Yuán as she strode through the tactical passageway towards the bridge. Moving to the right just a bit as she reached the navigator’s auxiliary position behind Flight Lieutenant Hall’s chair, she turned and spoke to Cross, “I know it’s visible on the CIC monitors, but I never get tired of actually seeing Earth through the forward viewports.”

The ever snarky Spencer looked over his shoulder and commented, “Thought you had forgotten about us all the way up here in the nose, Ma’am. Didn’t seem like an official departure without you standing there behind Wendy.”

“Not in charge of departures or arrivals any more, Flight Lieutenant,” Yuán replied dryly. “That’s XO Cross’s department now.”

Cross smiled as he took in the view. “Still a lot of debris floating around out there, Captain. Didn’t you ask the big machines to clean it up?”

Xiùlán’s answer was interrupted by Spencer. “Geosynced orbit achieved over Vancouver, Captain. Shuttle can be launched anytime you’re ready.”

“Very well, Flight Lieutenant.” Returning her attention to Cross, Xiùlán said, “They were to retrieve all the organic remains out here first … bodies and pieces, remains of all the people ejected from their ships when the Reapers turned them into scrap. No barriers strong enough to resist being hit by those things. After that, they were to retrieve and consolidate the scraps, see what can be salvaged for new ship construction. Massive quantities of refined Eezo floating around, clouds of frozen H3 … a lot of that is recoverable.”

Thinking about the Eezo, Cross observed, “You know, a huge amount of the raw Eezo produced for refinement comes from Omega Station. The amounts of refined material out here, plus what’s orbiting Palaven, or Thessia? We start recovering that in major quantities, the price people are
willing to pay for the raw material will plummet.”

“Yeah? So what’s your point?”

Cross grimaced. “Point is, Omega. I really can’t conceive of ‘Queen’ T’Loak sitting idly by on the sidelines as the price for her major source of income slides down a rat hole.”

Xiùlán’s face mirrored the grimace of her XO. “That’s how wars break out, Lieutenant. I hope you’re wrong.”

She stared out the viewports above her pilots’ heads for a number of seconds; when she resumed speaking, it was barely louder than a whisper. “Nothing they taught us in the classes could prepare us for the realities of losing a battle … a war … in space. If you’re not killed instantly by an explosion, being spaced alive when a ship is violently ripped apart by explosive decomp is a brutal way to die … watching it happen to another ship, wondering if you’re going to be next…”

As she turned to leave the bridge, she clapped Lieutenant Hall on the shoulder and said, “Come on, Wendy … let’s get the shuttle launched so we can finish our assignment and get back to the Citadel.”

The Flight Lieutenant locked down her control interface as she replied, “Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

♦

CRONOS STATION · ANADIUS, HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦

Iringū-Eßizkur had precisely placed her four main legs above and to the side of the air lock hatch she had chosen as an entry to the abandoned Cerberus Space Station. The articulated claws at the ends of each leg tightly grasped irregularities on the surface of the station’s pressure hull. The Repository then extended a boarding tube from her own hatch to the outer airlock hatch on the station’s hull, circumferentially sealing the tube around the hatch.

Transfer passageway is ready for your use, Dr T’Soni, Garrus Vakarian. Caution is advised. I will be unable to aid you should you encounter hostiles within the station. Iringū-Eßizkur’s voice ‘sounded’ worried. I can provide directions for you, should you become disoriented. Suggestion: Locate a power control terminal to force an increase in the reactor power levels to enable normal lighting levels and artificial gravity.

An armored-up Garrus clipped his Phaeston assault rifle to the hard point over his left shoulder and his M-97 Viper over his right. He chose a Carnifex to clip to his left side mount as a backup weapon, then pocketed as many thermal clips as he could, turned to Liara and said, “Hope I don’t need any of this stuff.”

Liara had armored-up as well, but chose to carry only an Acolyte heavy pistol and a Disciple shotgun. “Better to carry them and bring them back unused, Garrus.” Adding clips to her utility pockets, she grabbed her helmet, smiled at Garrus and said, “Let’s be off.”

“Open the hatch please, Iringū-Eßizkur,” Garrus said as he pulled his helmet on; Liara pulled hers on as well and they stepped into the small compartment that formed an airlock aboard Iringū-Eßizkur, who irised the inner hatch closed, then opened her outer hatch into the docking tube. Gravity inside the tube was negligible, allowing the pair to mostly float the short distance to the side of Cronos Station.

Once at the station airlock, Liara activated her omnitool and sent a code she hoped would open the hatch. After waiting for what seemed to be forever, the hatch slowly segmented open, allowing them to enter the isolation section. Here’s the control console, Garrus.” Liara entered several
commands; this caused the outer door to close, followed by the chamber being filled with air. Liara monitored the progress on the console while Garrus inspected what he could see of the station interior through the viewports set in the wall on either side of the hatch. Liara commented as she input the codes to unseal and open the inner hatch, “Gravity in here feels like station normal to me … about one-half to two-thirds of planetary normal.”

When she was ready, Liara pulled her heavy pistol; in response, Garrus pulled and charged his assault rifle. They hugged the bulkhead to either side of the inner hatch as Liara spoke over the comlink, “Irinqii-Eßizkur, we’re getting ready to enter the station,” then to the big turian, “Opening the hatch, Garrus.”

The hatch responded promptly to Liara’s activation sequence—as it retracted into its sectional pockets, dimmed ceiling and belt rail lights ramped up to full illumination. The chamber they found themselves in was not very large—perhaps seven, seven and a half by nine or ten meters. There were several rows of large lockers, many with full helmets sitting on top. “Looks like a compartment for dressing out for working outside on the hull,” Garrus observed. “Must be some concealed electrical or communications gear out there, perhaps … Liara, remember the exterior of the Broker’s ship over Hagalaz? Outside of that thing seemed to be crawling with mechs and repair gangs.”

The mention of Hagalaz sent a mental shudder through Liara’s mind. “Goddess! Don’t remind me about that ship, Garrus,” she grumped. “It was every bit as creepy inside … never knew what would jump out at you from behind a bulkhead.”

They moved carefully to the far end of the compartment, where they found a segmented hatch jammed partially open by the armored body of an assault trooper. “Looks like he was trying to escape,” remarked the turian.

Looking around, Garrus found the soldier’s assault rifle, which he quickly jammed into the door segments above the unfortunate man. Docking his own assault rifle, he looked at Liara. “I’m going to try to shift him out of the doorway. These things are spring loaded to stay closed and sealed without power, so it should attempt to close once it’s no longer jammed by him.” Garrus grunted with the effort as he partially lifted the man by his shoulders and rolled him out of the doorway into the next room. The door jerked as the blockage was removed, only to encounter another obstacle in the form of the assault rifle holding the upper segments at bay.

Garrus held his hand out to Liara to help her over the threshold of the door opening bulkhead. Turning around to inspect the area they’d entered, they both agreed the scene before them was something out of a nightmare—Cerberus assault troopers, centurions and a few engineers lay dead where they had fallen, scattered about the floor and on some of the work benches—bloody trails and spatters seemed to confirm that at least some of the fighting between Cerberus and Alliance forces led by Commander Shepard had taken place here. The walls and interior furnishings were all tattooed from bullet impacts, with holes and burn marks from energy weapons. Shards from shattered and broken portable shield generators and towers, along with bits and pieces of destroyed engineer-placed gun turrets, crunched underfoot as they carefully walked into the middle of the large room.

“Spirits!” A touch of awe colored the big turian’s sub-harmonics as he looked around. “I read the commander’s report on this place, but never realized Shepard, Vega and EDI had run into this sort of resistance! How’d they manage to get through here unscathed?”

Liara brought up her omnitool; upon inspecting the results of her query, she unsealed, then carefully removed her helmet. After taking a breath of air, she gagged before quickly pulling the helmet back
on and resealing it to her suit. “Goddess be damned!” The asari gasped as she took a couple of breaths of air from her suit. “The odor in this place is not for anyone with a weak stomach, Garrus.”

Garrus chuckled. “Would that include a certain asari archeologist, Dr T’Soni?”

Knowing the cheeky turian couldn’t see her face through her tinted visor, she settled for whacking him atop his near arm at the shoulder, something she was sure would not be felt under all the padding of his armored suit. “Especially the archeologist. Come on … I need to find the Illusive Man’s private office. Must be on one of the upper levels. Perhaps the air up there will smell cleaner.”

“It’d be nice to find an elevator that’s still working … and safe to use,” came the reply.

Iringù-Êßizkur’s voice came over their headsets. ›There are two elevators in a passageway immediately ahead of your position. The first one you encounter will only go halfway to your goal. Enter the second elevator and activate the code I am sending you‹. Each of their omnitools lit up as Iringù-Êßizkur sent several triggering codes for their use. ›The passageway at the top of that elevator will lead you to the Illusive Man’s private office and quarters, as well as his observation deck‹.

“The observation deck … isn’t that where Shepard killed Kai Leng?”

›It is, Dr T’Soni.‹

Garrus asked, “Iringù-Êßizkur, will we have to travel all the way back down to this level in order to reboard you?”

›Negative, Garrus Vakarian.‹ The lilting, feminine voice of the former Reaper sounded positively … happy. ›I have discovered an airlock above my current location, on the level of the Illusive Man’s private quarters, adjacent to the observation deck. Its placement appears to have been for the sole purpose of providing him an emergency escape route from the station, as he apparently did when my brethren relocated the Citadel. It cannot be accessed from outside to gain entry into the station‹.

Liara looked at the far side of the room and discovered the pressure doors that led further into the station’s interior. “Over here, Garrus.”

As they began moving through the area, avoiding and climbing over the remnants of the Illusive Man’s private army, Garrus said, “Iringù-Êßizkur, hold your position until T’Soni and I are on our way up. No sense in you relocating to a different airlock if we’re unable to reach the Illusive Man’s inner sanctum.”

›It will be as you request, Garrus Vakarian‹.

♦ CITY of VANCOUVER, B.C., WESTERN NORTH AMERICA · EARTH ♦

Upon completing her pre-landing checklist, Wendy Hall banked the shuttle over hard as she circled the field, having elected to maintain manual control on their approach and touch-down. Once she saw the designated parking spot below, she descended rapidly from 75 meters and expertly brought the ungainly craft to a stable hover above the pavement, the wash from the ventral thruster array kicking up dirt and other light debris before she pulled them offline and set the Eezo core to slightly increase their total mass, allowing the ungainly looking transport to settle to the pavement with a slight bump.
Captain Yuán stood from the co-pilot’s seat and said, “Nice job, Flight Lieutenant,” as she stretched. Moving around the compartment bulkhead, she nodded to Corporal Vic, who palmed the control knob to open the hatches on both sides of the main cargo area. The six Marines quickly deployed, three on either side of the shuttle; Vic looked at the two sergeants accompanying the JAG courier and said, “If you would follow me, please?”

Saying, “We shouldn’t be too long, Ms Hall,” Xiùlán followed Hobe and the two accompanying sergeants, leaving Wendy to wait with the shuttle; all ten people walked along the flight line to the operations office, where they were greeted by a grizzled old Marine Master Sergeant. Looking at them through the acrid smoke drifting from a nasty looking cigar clamped between his teeth, he attempted to come to attention and offer a salute. It was all Xiùlán could do to keep a straight face as she returned his salute; the general must not get out this far often enough to keep this old guy in line.

The sergeant did manage to speak rather clearly around the stump of the cigar, saying, “Hello, Cap’n. You from the Hong Kong?”

Yuán tried to keep her distance from the foul-smelling cigar smoke as she returned the ragged salute and answered, “That’s us. Where do we go to meet General Park?”

Three tobacco-stained fingers grabbed the butt of the cigar to use as a pointer as he replied, “Straight down the hallway to the last door, Ma’am. General’s waiting for ya in there.”

“Thanks, Master Sergeant.” With a nod of her head to Vic, she continued, “Lead the way, Corporal.”

They all walked down the passageway to the door indicated by the Master Sergeant; Vic rapped the door with his knuckles and received an almost immediate order to enter. The corporal opened the door and led them into the reception area, where they all snapped to attention and saluted as General RaeLee Park stepped around the partition to her office. She smiled as she returned their salutes and said, “As you were, Gentlemen. Thank you for coming.”

Spotting Yuán at the rear of the group, her smile grew wider as she moved past the Marines. “Xiùlán! Damn if you’re not a sight for sore eyes!” Park stepped up in front of her former protégé and grabbed her hands with both of hers. Stepping back, she exclaimed, “A Captain now! … and of your own warship, no less! Damn! I can’t begin to tell you how glad I am to see you here today. How have you been?”

A blushing Xiùlán was nearly speechless. General Park had never struck her as being overly demonstrative or friendly, even during their long-ago dinner on Mars. She pulled herself together just enough to stammer out, “I’m fine, General. It’s good to see you as well.”

A still grinning Park looked quickly around at the group of men surrounding her until she spotted the courier. “Corporal … Hobe, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Hobe had not expected to be talking to the general—he just wanted to get the damned papers delivered, get the receipt signed and witnessed and get back to his cushy life on the Citadel.

“I remember your name, Corporal … trial for a friend of yours? … Luna Base, 2179, right? A lot of things have happened since that time.”

“Begging the general’s pardon, but … he wasn’t a friend.” Hobe looked Park straight in the eyes as he concluded, “All he ever did was cause trouble for me.”
Park’s smile lessened slightly as she nodded. “Glad his trouble didn’t rub off on you permanently, Corporal.” Glancing at each of his two escorts, she said, “Gentlemen, let’s get this done.”

Looking at Hobe, she said, “Corporal, if you would?” Park motioned to the central counter. “Let’s open that case right here.” As Hobe moved to comply with her request, Park looked around towards the main door and said to her yeoman, “Myeong, bring your datapad, please.”

Hobe entered the code he’d memorized to unlock the case, which when opened revealed a large, white plastic pouch inside, its ‘open’ end sealed with bright orange, tamper-evident tape; ‘ALLIANCE JAG’ was printed in an endless diagonal pattern of bright green across its surface – removing the tape would leave the green lettering behind on the white surface, indicating a broken seal.

Hobe removed the white pouch from the case and handed it to Yeoman Myeong; she carefully removed the tamper-evident tape, reached into the pouch and removed the sealed envelope from within; this was stamped with FOR THE EYES OF… / …ONLY, with General Park’s name hand printed between the slashes. Myeong turned, took three steps and handed the envelope to the general.

Park sighed as she hefted the package of official documents. “Thank you, Yeoman Myeong. You may sign for the delivery.”

The young woman turned back towards Hobe, who was holding a clipboard containing a piece of lined paper. He handed her a stylus, waited for her to print her name, rank, date and time of day across the page, then had her duplicate the task on a datapad. After signing her name on the paper and the datapad and having Hobe sign and date her datapad, the corporal placed both of his items in the case, which he then closed and locked. “Only ones that can open that now are Jag officers back on the Citadel,” he commented. “My code will only work one time.”

Xiùlán looked at General Park and said, “I’m sorry we can’t stay, chat for a bit… maybe have lunch, but I really need to return these people to the Citadel, General.”

Park grinned at her and offered her right hand. “Captain, we have simply got to sit down to dinner again, sometime soon. It’d be even better if Traynor could be there, but dammit, if too much more time gets by us, a single dinner won’t be enough time for all the catching up we’ll need to do!”

“Agreed, General.” Xiùlán shook her hand, then turned to Vic. “Okay, Corporal. We’ve kept the general from her work long enough … let’s head back to the shuttle.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Vic responded, then spoke to his squad. “Okay everyone, let’s move out!”
Ghosts From The Past

And amid all the splendours of the World, its vast halls and spaces, and its wheeling fires, Ilúvatar chose a place for their habitation in the Deeps of Time and in the midst of the innumerable stars. — J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion

Argen - ghost or spirit (Thessian)
SCPO - Senior Chief Petty Officer

♦ CRONOS STATION, ANADIUS · HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦

Garrus and Liara had managed to pick their way across the large chamber without stepping on any of the many fallen soldiers, cut down months ago by the small squad from the Normandy. Once through the doorway on the far side, they found themselves in a huge passageway in which there were several more bodies. “The commander, EDI and Vega sure blazed a trail through this place,” Garrus commented dryly.

Focused as she was on her omnitool generated map, Liara didn’t reply immediately; when she did speak, it was to point to a door, as unremarkable in appearance as any they had passed and any of the ones ahead of them. “This is it, Garrus. We need to go through here.”

“But the trail of bodies? …” Garrus waved to indicate the remainder of the passage. “… Shepard obviously continued to the end.”

“We know from her after-action report they climbed catwalks through a large chamber, where they found the remnant of the human-Reaper larva.” Shaking her head, she concluded, “I really don’t think the Illusive Man would take the long way around to reach his observation post.”

“Didn’t Iringù-Eßizkur say we needed the second elevator?”

“She did,” came the reply. “This is the entrance we need to use.” So saying, she entered a code into her omnitool, resulting in the segmented door retracting to reveal what was obviously a high-speed elevator car. Two low stools were positioned against opposite walls, indicating the ride to the top might take a few minutes to complete.

With a look over her shoulder at Garrus, Liara entered the car and sat down on one of the stools; Garrus sighed heavily as he followed her inside, electing to stand rather than attempt to fit his turian backside onto what looked to him to be little more than a seat for a small child. Liara entered the code she’d received from Iringù-Eßizkur, the segmented doors closed and the car began its journey to what they hoped would prove to be the Illusive Man’s offices.

In less than eight minutes, they felt their weight lessen considerably as the car began to slow its ascent. “Guess he didn’t feel the need for inertial dampeners on an elevator,” Garrus commented dryly. “Iringù-Eßizkur … it would appear we are nearly to our destination. You may proceed with your relocation to the exit airlock.”

Their Destroyer Repository responded, ›As you wish, Garrus Vakarian‹.

The elevator car finally came to a stop and the doors opened into a short passageway as a mechanical sounding female voice startled them with, “Welcome home, Mr Harper.”
Liara shook her head as she paused, hand on the door jamb, to cautiously poke her head out and look both ways. Nothing. “Come on, Garrus. Block that door open, just in case … Let’s find what we need and get off this argen station”

Garrus shoved one of the stools into the path of the door segments, pulled his assault rifle and followed the asari down the hall. “Do you know where we need to go to reach the airlock we’ll have to use to leave this place?”

“Iringù-Eßizkur is sending a navpoint to the HUDs in our helmets.”

T’Soni held her omnitool up at each of the several sealed doors they walked past, until it flashed an alternating orange-red at one door. “This is the one.”

She entered another passcode, to which the door responded by rapidly opening, allowing a Cerberus Phantom, complete with a monomolecular blade, to leap out at them. Garrus couldn’t risk a shot for fear of hitting Liara, who fell over backwards in surprise. As the Phantom started to drop towards T’Soni, she recovered her wits and quickly used a biotic throw to smash the armored woman against the overhead.

T’Soni rolled out of the way as the Phantom fell motionless to the deck; Garrus was there in an instant, rifle in the assassin’s faceplate. As Liara regained her composure and got her breathing under control, she started to giggle as she regained her feet. With Garrus looking at her as if she had become unhinged, Liara reached down, grabbed the upper edge of the Phantom’s chestplate and lifted it from the floor. “It’s just an empty suit of armor, Garrus. Not even a body inside.” She stabbed the tip of the blade weapon into the floor and left it, then tossed the suit down the passage. Entering the compartment, she said, “Come on, Garrus … Let’s see what other surprises we can find.”

“That damned surprise sure startled me,” Garrus growled in reply. “I thought you were done, T’Soni! Let’s try to not have any more surprises like that.”

With Liara cautiously leading the way, the unlikely pair of explorers proceeded into what proved to be a treasure trove of terminals, all appearing to be connected to the main servers for the entire station. Liara paused in front of a rather prominent control interface; after studying its layout for several seconds, she brought up both hands and began entering commands. A large viewscreen above the haptic interface came to life, displaying various department names with a list of all the electronically saved documents stored within each.

“Here it is, Garrus! The Lazarus Project.” Unfortunately, Liara’s attempt to open the file met with failure … besides lacking the necessary security clearance, she did not have the password required to open the files once she was in. “Goddess! Where’s Tali’Zorah when you need her? She’d be able to break into this system without even working hard.”

“As would Specialist Traynor,” Garrus added quietly. After a few moments, he offered, “You know, Iringù-Eßizkur would have no trouble breaking the encryption and password requirements. She could simply elevate your status in the hierarchy here.”

The Repository had been monitoring the conversations between the turian and asari; speaking to both, she said, “I have accessed the station’s servers, and have just entered your name as a lieutenant of Jack Harper, Dr T’Soni. You should now have the same level of access previously enjoyed exclusively by the Illusive Man.” The musical lilt in Iringù-Eßizkur’s words sounded pleased as she continued, “Opinion: your search for information would be more efficient if I were to simply download everything stored on the station’s servers. You could then search the archives from within
Liara stared at the display in front of her as she processed Iringù-Eßizkur’s words. “You have sufficient storage capacity … for all of it?”

Human file storage protocols are primitive by Repository standards, Liara T’Soni, came the rather smug sounding answer. There is more than enough room within my own storage structure for everything on Cronos servers. You may save what is needed; I can purge the mundane as you direct.

Liara cast Garrus a look of surprise as she replied, “Proceed, Iringù-Eßizkur.”

She idly looked through several files while waiting for confirmation from the Repository that all the information had been copied over. One file in particular grabbed her attention. “Garrus, take a look at this. It talks about Rachaél’s biotic amp. There was a …” she brought her hand to her mouth as she stopped. “The Illusive Man didn’t want Miranda’s team implanting a control chip, but that didn’t stop him from having Dr Wilson implant a terminator chip in her biotic amp!”

“A what? How would that even work, T'Soni?”

“It was programmed to send a biotic overload directly into her cerebral cortex! Garrus, it would have dropped her instantly! The only evidence left behind for an autopsy to discover would have indicated she suffered an irregular amp malfunction! It had a five-year timer which began counting down partway through her reconstruction. Had she survived the end of the war … Goddess! Not even Miranda knew of it.”

Garrus voice flanged noticeably as he replied, “The Illusive Man may have feared the Commander would do exactly what she ultimately accomplished, Liara. She destroyed the Collector home station in spite of … or more likely because of … his desire to keep it intact for Cerberus to exploit. She turned a multi-billion-credit Cerberus-owned warship over to the Alliance to use against the Reapers, and she managed to stop the Reapers without selling her soul to do it.” Garrus chuckled at the recollection. “Shepard wouldn’t have been much better than a husk if Miranda had implanted a control chip, Liara, but the Illusive Man didn’t want her to enjoy a happy life after the Reapers, either. That terminator chip would have been a post-war payback for her betrayal of Cerberus. It's as if he knew she wouldn't play by his rules.”

Files have been successfully copied, Dr T’Soni. Do you wish to explore this station any further?

“Were you able to copy the Illusive Man’s personal files, Iringù-Eßizkur?”

There were several locations on the server that held heavily encrypted files, Dr T’Soni. All bear similarly distinctive formats; based on unencrypted, routine files created daily by the Illusive Man, these encrypted files are indicative of having been created by the same person. Iringù-Eßizkur paused for several moments, as if she were ‘looking’ at the files in question; her next statement was a bit of unwelcome news. While it is true I would be able to break the encryption without much difficulty, I believe the data being protected would become hopelessly corrupt as a result of any attempt at blunt force intrusion. It would be better to have the passcode … the key, for lack of a better term … to unlock these files.

“This contradicts your earlier statement regarding my access to the files, Iringù-Eßizkur,” Liara said. “Does not my newly gained ‘status’ as a trusted lieutenant grant me authorization to unlock those files?”
Granting you access to the files does not give you the key to unlock the encryption, Dr T’Soni, the Repository replied, musical undertones sounding a minor key. Decrypting the files still requires a key. It would consist of an alpha-numeric string that would have to be entered as a password to correctly reassemble the file structure as it’s opened.

“Then you have your answer, Iringù-Ebizzkur,” Liara replied, her tone one of resignation. “We must explore a bit further and attempt to access the Illusive Man’s private living quarters.”

♦ STREETS of INVERNESS RESTAURANT, CITADEL · 1920 HOURS ♦

“Donnelly? Ah hae a reservation fur twa, 1930?” Ken Donnelly was nervously studying his reflection in the gilded, mirrored wall behind the counter in the lobby of the Streets of Inverness Restaurant. He had come here accompanied by newly-promoted SCPO Gabriella Daniels in order to treat her to a ‘sit-down’ dinner of Scottish cuisine and—of greater importance to his mind—ask her to marry him.

They were both decked out in Alliance dress blue uniforms, and Donnelly was beginning to think they should have arrived in civilian dress when the maître d’ idly inquired about the ship they served on. Donnelly hadn’t expected the response they received when he told the man they were assigned to the SSV Normandy—the maître d’ quickly confirmed his reservation, grabbed a pair of printed menus and promptly led them to a secluded table for two, near enough to the bar and kitchen to get prompt service without being so close they couldn’t have a quiet dinner with a bit of privacy.

Within moments of being seated, a young woman appeared at Donnelly’s side with iced water and an inquiry about drinks and appetizers. Gabby had never tasted most of the food native Scots took for granted, so deferred to Ken regarding what she’d try.

“M’lady wull hae a cup o’ th’ brose o’ th’ day wi’ th’ taps aff homemade breid, ‘n’ i’ll hae th’ oatmeal coated haggis wi’ potato fondant, roast crushed turnip ‘n’ whisky jus.”

The young waitress smiled at Ken and asked, “Would you or the lady care for some wine with your appetizers, sir?”

Gabby gave a slight shake of her head, so Ken replied, “I’ll hae a tumbler o’ Finca Villacreces, if ye wid, please?”

“Very good sir. I’ll be right back.”

Gabby smiled at Ken as she took a sip of water. “I always knew you liked haggis, but never thought I’d be having dinner with you when you ordered it. And when did you become a connoisseur of fine wines? That one you just ordered sounds expensive.”

“Ah don’t hae anything … or anyone … else tae spend mah credits oan, Gabby. Ah don’t …” Ken paused and looked away, embarrassed by her close scrutiny; looking back at her, he felt all warm and tingly inside as he said, “Hae ah tellt ye howfur absolutely bonnie ye look th’ nicht, Gabriella?”

She blushed, the color rising from the collar of her jacket until her cheeks were fiery red. “I don’t believe you have, Ken. I don’t even know if you’ve ever complemented me on my looks.” She dropped her eyes for a moment, then looked up at him, eyes hooded slightly by her brow. “It’s nice to know you pay attention,” she finished in a husky voice.

A bit flustered, Donnelly started to change the subject when their waitress returned with a large serving tray, which she placed on a folding stand beside their table. Saying, “Soup and bread for the
lady …” she set the bowl of steaming liquid in front of Gabby, along with a small dish and covered basket containing a miniature loaf of bread; picking up a metal cover, she lifted the plate from beneath and set it in front of Ken with a flourish as she finished with, “… and for the gentleman, haggis with fondant potatoes, turnip and whiskey jus.”

Donnelly’s eyes glazed over as he admired the food in front of him. “Thank ya,” he breathed. “First time I’ve bin able tae hae food fae me homeland in whit seems lik’ forever! It looks delicious.”

Glancing around behind herself, she turned back to the couple and finished with, “Your wine will be here in a few moments; I’ll return shortly to take your dinner order. Enjoy,” she finished with a smile.

Ken barely glanced at the waitress as she departed, his eyes glued to the haggis before him. Gabby laughed lightly and gave him a nudge under the table with her foot, grinning as she asked, “You going to eat that or ask it to marry you? Only other thing I’ve seen you stare at that long is my chest, Mr Donnelly … when we were supposed to be playing cards.”

Ken almost swallowed his tongue with a rapid inhale of breath at Gabby’s question, but saved himself by pounding on his own chest and coughing hard, his face turning bright red in the process. “Weel … What’s a jimmy tae dae, Gabby? Ah can’t hulp that ah lik’ to … appreciate … a braw figure!”

“Why, Kenneth! I do believe that’s twice in the same night that you’ve complimented me.” It was now Gabby’s turn to blush, but her voice remained steady, if not a shade slightly higher in pitch than her standard. “Thank you … You know, if you like haggis so much, I’m sure they could arrange to have it on the Normandy … at least once in a while.”

Ken sighed as he started to eat. “That’s nae likely tae happen … ah dinnae hawp a’body else likes it enough fur it tae be a permanent addition tae th’ menu. Speaking o’ menus …” He looked at the dinner menu as Gabby smiled, picked up a spoon and began eating her soup. She glanced at her menu as well, but already had an idea of what she wanted to eat.

A waiter appeared at their side with a long-stem goblet half-full of liquid, deep burgundy in color; setting it down in front of Donnelly, he gave an almost imperceptible bow and departed as their waitress reappeared. “Have you made a decision on your meals?”

Gabby replied, “I’d like the roast breast of chicken with mushroom & tarragon risotto and garlic & herb butter.”

“Very good, Ma’am,” she replied. “And for you, Sir?”

“I’ll hae th’ wee Scotch beef fillet dane up medium rare, wi’ th’ caramelized shallots, broccoli, freish neeps ’n’ rid vino collapso jus.”

She picked up their menus and asked, “More wine?”

Ken responded, “Aye, please,” while Gabby asked for a nice Beaujolais to go with her chicken.

After the waitress left to get their selections started, Ken took a sip of wine and worked on finishing his haggis before their dinners arrived; between mouthfuls, he and Gabby chatted about various topics, most of which did not include their jobs on the Normandy.
Kaidan Alenko, needing to speak with Captain Yuán regarding her past experiences with Joesiar, was waiting at the dock as the Hong Kong returned to its berth. Standing beside the Hangar Bay ramp as it lowered to within a few centimeters of the metal decking of the Citadel’s lower platform, he acknowledged the greeting from the sergeants accompanying the JAG courier with a nod as they left the ship; turning his attention to Corporal Vic standing at the top of the ramp inside the ship, he asked, “Permission to come aboard, Corporal?”

Vic recognized Alenko with a wave of his hand as he replied, “Permission granted, Major, and welcome aboard. Going to see the Captain?”

“I am,” came the cheery reply.

“Of course … I’ll accompany you up to Deck Two.” As Kaidan walked up the ramp, Vic touched his comlink and said, “Major Alenko is here to see Captain Yuán … I’m bringing him up.” Vic smiled as Alenko paused beside him. “Let’s head up to the crew’s mess area, Major. XO Cross is passing your request along to the Skipper.”

Alenko looked at Vic as he walked towards the elevator and asked, “How’s Ms Lawson doing, Corporal? I mean … how’s she doing in her new job?”

“Haven’t heard anything negative about her, Sir. Definitely seems to be squared away.”

“Hhmmm. That’s good to hear.” Kaidan moved to the side as he entered the elevator and leaned on one of the guard rails; when it stopped on Deck Two, the door in front of him lowered into its slot, allowing him to exit alongside Vic.

“Have some coffee, Sir. I need to head up to the CIC and talk to XO Cross,” Vic said. “Should only be a few minutes until the captain comes down.”

“Thanks, Corporal … I appreciate it.” As Vic disappeared up the curving staircase, Alenko turned and strolled around the corner to the beverage station, poured himself a mug of coffee and took it to a nearby table to wait.

As promised, it was only a minute or two before Captain Yuán strode past the elevator to the table, stuck her hand out and said, “Major? What brings you here?”

Alenko stood and grasped her hand. “Captain. How are you?”

“Doing great. Just got back from a quick ‘out’n’back to Terra … transported a JAG courier to Vancouver for Admiral Hackett. I understand you’re here to see me?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied as he retook his seat. “I’ll get right to it … You have some history with Jason Joesiar, from your early time in the Navy? If you have a few minutes, I’d like to hear about the things that transpired during your training at Alliance Base Luna.”

“I do have a few minutes, Major, and that’ll probably be all you need from me. Surely you’re aware that Specialist Traynor had more run-ins with him than I did.”

“She’s still ashore on leave, correct?”

Xiùlán nodded. “We both worked together to take him down, but really? She’s the main reason he’s no longer in the Navy. Unfortunately for us, he chose to join the Blue Suns.” Xiùlán looked down for a minute before continuing. “My first run-in with him was during an exercise on the live-fire range there, Major. Two people tasked with taking out an AI controlled sniper’s nest … Joesiar had the sniper rifle. Did absolutely nothing while waiting in good cover. I took out the VI
controlling the opposing sniper … made the mistake of standing and facing up range once I was in the ‘nest’. Little bastard shot me in the chestplate, put me on my back with the wind knocked outta me. That wouldn’t have mattered so much if he hadn’t offered to massage my … chest … afterwards.”

“How bad were you hurt?” Kaidan inquired with some concern.

“It was a low-power non-enhanced alloy pellet. No damage to my ceramic plate, but the bruise on my chest was really something to behold!” Yuán chuckled at the memory. “The VI sniper rifle was undamaged by my attack; I managed to reprogram the rifle’s logic board with my omnitool, then took the little bastard down with a shot to his shoulder and one to his leg. Never heard so much squealing in my life.”

Kaidan took a sip from his mug and commented, “Sounds as if he had it coming, Captain. What’d you do?”

“Patched the hole in his suit and walked him back to quarters.” Xiùlán sighed as she thought back to that time. “I guess what irked me most was his misogynistic, racist attitude towards me. ‘Chop Stick’ was his favorite term for me. I had to do a bit of research to understand the other name he called me—‘Chinker Bell’—I’ll never understand how a racial bigot like that ever made it through the entrance exams.” Alenko finished his coffee and nodded. “And that was before the Reapers. With so many injured and dead following the Reaper War, I expect the Alliance will have to lower their admission standards, allowing even more of his type to join.”

“My God, Major! I sincerely hope you’re wrong about that.” Xiùlán shook her head. “They all seem to forget it was a woman that saved their bacon from the fire. Anyway, that was the beginning of our efforts—mine and Samantha’s—to get the little cretin tossed out of the program and out of the Navy. You’ll have to ask Traynor to tell you how she taught him and one of his followers some respect … for her, at least. Matter of fact, the follower I’m speaking of was just on this ship. He’s working as a courier for the JAG office ashore.”

As Alenko rose to leave, he asked, “If it’s not too much trouble, would you allow me a few minutes with Specialist Lawson. I’d like to ask her to dinner, perhaps go to a show?”

Yuán smiled as she touched the comlink in her ear. “Specialist Lawson? Would you mind locking your terminal and joining me in the crew’s mess hall?”

After a few moments, she turned back to Alenko and said, “She’ll be right down.”

When Miranda came around the elevator tower, she quickly hid her look of surprise at the presence of Major Alenko as she asked, “You needed to see me, Ma’am?”

Xiùlán was already standing to leave as she answered, “Ah, Specialist Lawson. Major Alenko would like to speak with you.” Nodding at Kaidan, she finished with, “I’ll be in my quarters if you need anything further, Major.”

♦ STREETS of INVERNESS RESTAURANT, CITADEL · 2045 HOURS ♦

Ken Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels had finished their leisurely dinner of Scottish cuisine and were chatting over after-dinner drinks when Ken went strangely quiet. Gabby watched him as he fumbled under the table for a few moments before bringing up a small box, maybe 15 centimeters square by about 6 deep. He set it on the table and slowly, almost hesitantly, pushed it across the surface until it rested in front of her.
“Ah bought this fur ye, Gabby … bit afore ye open it, ah hae something tae tell ye.” He swallowed hard past the sudden restriction that had mysteriously appeared in his throat and continued on. “Ah ken ah hae ne’er said this tae ye afore, Gabby. Ah juist waant ye tae know … weel, I … I’m nae sure how … okay, this is juist crazy! Gabriella Daniels, yer th’ maist bonnie woman ah hae ever hud th’ privilege o’ bein’ associated with … ‘n’ you’re certainly th’ prettiest woman in this steid th’ nicht. I’ve bin wanting tae tell ye howfur bonny yer fur a lang time, and … weel, ah hae tae tell you … I’m in love wi’ ye.”

Gabby’s mouth fell open as she looked quickly around them before focusing intently on Ken. “You … think I’m beautiful? And … you … love me? Ken, that’s simply …” Gabby’s throat refused to permit speech for several seconds as she quickly took a sip from her water glass to hide her uncertainty.

Ken’s mind was racing to an inevitably incorrect conclusion as she paused. ‘ere it comes – she’s aff tae tell me nice try, bit ah don’t hae ony feelin’s fur ye, Donnelly, ye Igowk. Dammit! A’m sae stupid! I’ve waited tae long … I’ve waited tae lang ‘n’ she’s aff tae shoot me doon.’

Brown eyes shiny with unshed tears, Gabby struggled to rein in her emotions as she continued in a suddenly husky voice, “… simply the most surprising thing you could ever say to me. Kenneth, I’m in love with you! … I’ve loved you ever since we went through tech school! You don’t know how much I’ve longed for you to tell me you love me!”

Donnelly almost couldn’t believe his good fortune. “Gabby, if ye’v loved me a’ this time, then how come did ye hault yer horses sae lang tae tell me?”

“Fear … embarrassment … I didn’t want you to think I simply had a schoolgirl crush on you. Then when we were assigned to the Perugia, and the Normandy, you were always making comments about other women. I couldn’t see how I could compete, how I …”

“Oh Gabby … a’m sae sorry! ah ne’er realized … a’ that time, ye loved me ‘n’ ne’er said anythin’! ah wis blind, Gabby … tae blind tae realize th’ love o’ mah lee wis at mah side.” To hear Gabby tell him she was in love with him was … almost overwhelming! Recovering his wits, he glanced at the package and said, “Yer present? Micht wantae open it …”

Gabby hands were shaking so bad she feared she’d drop it, so carefully picked it up; she already suspected the box contained a ring, even if it was quite large. ‘How am I going to answer when he asks? Shit, Daniels … what makes you think he’s going to ask you anything? We can’t serve together if we’re married. But what if he doesn’t ask me to marry him? He wouldn’t break my heart like that, would he? Oh God! What the hell am I to do? Just open the damn box, Gabriella, that’s what you do!’ Whispering, “Looks like this came from an expensive store, Kenneth,” she carefully unwrapped it and pulled the lid off to reveal a slightly smaller box within – a beautiful presentation box covered in white leather and featuring a domed lid. She pressed the tiny stud to release the latch and tilted the lid up to reveal … “Oh, Kenneth, it’s beautiful,” she cried. “I don’t know what to say.” Gabby held her mouth with her free hand as the tears she’d been holding back overwhelmed her and ran down her cheeks.

Ken reached across the table to gently take the open case from her hand; he removed the intricate silver wire work bracelet with its three blue-toned rainbow colored moonstones from within and held it up for her to see as he said, “Gabby … ah teuk a lesson fae th’ asari. This jeweled cuff is a promise bracelet.”

Donnelly stood and came around the table to kneel beside her … placing the cuff on her left wrist and fastening the tiny silver clasp, he whispered, “Ah wis blind, Gabby, fur tae lang! This bracelet represents mah solemn promise tae ye, Gabriella Daniels … mah promise that ah wull ne’er love
anither woman, and … If ye wid dae me th’ honor o’ becoming mah guidwife, i’d be th’ happiest jimmy in th’ galaxy!”

Gabby stared at her long-time friend, kneeling on the floor beside her, as if seeing him for the first time ever. As long as she’d known him, she would have never dreamed that the heart of a romantic beat within his chest. “Kenneth …” she gulped, still trying to get her thoughts together. “Never in a million years would I have thought you’d want to … you really want to marry me? I don’t …” she stopped to look at the bracelet, its intricate silver wire work glinting in the low lights around them. Looking back at Donnelly, the uncertainty bordering on panic obvious in his expression, she suddenly realized she had been worrying over nothing and needed to give him an answer.

“Kenneth, I … do love you, and I’d be a fool to say no. Yes … Yes, I’ll be your wife.” She leaned towards him and tilted her head as he reached up towards her, using the thumbs on each hand to gently brush the tears from her face as he pressed his lips to hers. Though a bit awkward, the kiss was very satisfying for them both. When their lips parted, a quiet cough and the shuffle of feet could be heard behind them.

Ken stood up and looked around to find their waitress and the maître d’ both watching them, each with a big smile. The maître d’ spoke for both of them. “Congratulations, Sir … Ma’am … You have our wishes for all the happiness in the galaxy.”

♦ CRONOS STATION · ANADIUS, HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦

Liara T’Soni had spent an additional hour viewing the video recordings concerning the augmentations performed on the Illusive Man without gaining any insight into the mind of the man himself.

Garrus had quickly lost interest, as everything she chose to study seemed to be old news; the man was dead, by his own hand according to Shepard, and the clandestine ‘humanity first at any cost’ organization he had built ever since the First Contact War was every bit as dead. The big turian was amusing himself by looking around the large room; he saw something in his peripheral vision, at the end of the row of terminals, that caused him to pause. As he focused on the area that had caught his attention, he realized he was looking at some sort of doorway.

He drew his assault rifle while hissing, “T’Soni! Over here.”

Liara started at his voice; the tone sent a shiver of apprehension down her back. “What do you have, Garrus?”

“Looks like some sort of door, flush with the bulkhead,” he replied. “If you can open it, stand aside quickly … no telling what surprises are waiting for us on the other side.”

Liara came over to inspect Garrus’ discovery. Blue hands carefully felt along the perceived edges of the panel until she felt … a slight protrusion at the edge closest to the row of terminals. She pushed on it gently with no apparent effect. A slightly harder push rewarded her with the door springing open between 5 and 10 centimeters.

Garrus whispered, “Move back, Liara,” as he came up beside her; hooking a talon in the exposed gap, he backed away as he pulled the door open on its concealed hinges. Lights in the compartment beyond came on automatically as the door came completely open. Assault rifle ready, Garrus placed his shoulder against the door jamb and quickly tilted in then back out for a look inside; he looked over his shoulder as he made another quick move to visually inspect the area behind him. Seeing no movement, he started through the opening; only the quick thinking of the asari behind him saved his
An overhead turret spun around and locked onto his movement; it started auto firing armor-piercing rounds just as Liara hollered, “Garrus!” and projected a biotic barrier around him. “Get to cover, quickly!”

Garrus leaped behind a huge cabinet to the left just inside the door; causing the turret to cease firing after rotating to follow.

“Garrus! Are you hurt?” Liara’s voice squeaked with concern as she quickly dropped the protective barrier in preparation for some other action, should her friend require assistance.

“Nothing but my pride, T’Soni. Thankfully, you were very quick on the draw ... and my shields survived the initial volley.” As he continued, Garrus veritably growled in anger, sub-harmonics adding a sinister tone as he complained, “I can’t believe I walked right into that. I never even thought to look at the damned ceiling. Rookie mistake if ever there was one!”

Under the circumstances, Liara surprised herself by chuckling. “I’m sorry, Garrus. I shouldn’t laugh … especially since I have no idea how to disable the turret. You might be stuck there for a while.” She suddenly grinned mischievously, “Unless, of course, you need me to save you by protecting you with another barrier as you make a hasty retreat back out here to me.”

Garrus’ mandibles flexed in vexation before he also let out a short laugh. “Yeah. Yuck it up, T’Soni! Your turn to save the … I don’t even know the right word for a male, so just leave me here to die as punishment for saying this … the damsel in distress.”

At that, Liara couldn’t contain her laughter anymore and it exploded out of her. “Oh, Goddess, it feels good to honestly laugh for a change, though I really am sorry that it’s at your expense, Garrus.” Once she recovered, her voice became serious as she spoke again, generating a second barrier for the turian. “Come on; get out of there. I’m not sure how long I can hold this under such intense fire.”

“No, hang on a moment. Iringù-Eßizkur, can you override automated defense fire in this place?”

The Repository took several seconds to respond, but had welcome news when she did. ›Automatic defensive weapons are now offline‹

Garrus, with Liara’s barrier still surrounding him, poked his head out from behind the cabinet and looked at the ceiling-mounted turret; the device no longer tracked his movements. “Okay, T’Soni, you can relax. Come on in, let’s see what’s so important in here to require ceiling mounted automatic weapons”

Liara entered and began exploring, looking for anything that might be a decryption key for the private server files Iringù-Eßizkur had downloaded. “This area looks to be a publicly accessible area, Garrus … a place to meet with crew and discuss mundane subjects.” She continued to search, closely inspecting the datapads scattered about on numerous tables and counters, along with the two terminals that appeared to display the same information as the ones she had inspected outside the room.

Garrus opened a door—a hatch, actually—in the far corner of the room on the rear wall. Dim lights came on as the door segments retracted, revealing actual living quarters—a sitting room, dining room, bedroom and bath. Liara sat at the huge desk on which a large terminal display resided, along with a haptic keyboard. As she activated the interface, a distinctly feminine voice said, “Welcome back, Mr Harper.”
Liara looked at Garrus, who was inspecting every centimeter of these back compartments in an attempt to find the one thing he sensed they had yet to discover—an emergency escape route—a back door, a bolt hole, a way to get off the station in the event of an enemy attack. He stopped in front of a wall between the entrance to the bathroom and the massive closet in the bedroom. “Think I have something here …”

“As do I.” Liara replied. This terminal, isolated from the rest of the station’s computers, proved to be treasure trove of information, one she intended to exploit to the fullest. “Iringú-Eßizkur, please log into this terminal and download everything stored within it.”

›As you wish, Dr T’Soni‹ The Repository began extracting all the stored files within the terminal, including all the encryption keys created and used by the Illusive Man during his time on the station.

“Garrus, what did you find?”

“An exit to the outside,” came the answer. “It’ll save us from having to go all the way back the way we came. You ready to leave this place?”

“I am,” she said as she joined him. “It appears we’ve gathered as much information about Cerberus as possible … I’ll know a lot more once I’ve had a few days to analyze what we have.”

›Data transfer complete, Dr T’Soni. Standing by emergency exit airlock …‹

♦ ALLIANCE DOCKS · CHARLIE 06, BERTH 03 · 2045 HOURS ♦

“What did you need to see me about, Major?” Miranda sat rather hesitantly on the bench across from Alenko.

“Truthfully, I came down here to talk to you about Jason Joesiar, but …” Alenko paused at the ever so brief expression of worry that crossed the specialist’s face. “… but, I changed my mind. I don’t need to hear any more about that … person … not after sitting across from him in an interview room this morning.”

The relief shining in Miranda’s eyes confirmed he had made the right decision. “I really have an ulterior motive for being here, Ms Lawson. I was wondering … well, I’d like to take you out to dinner again, maybe see a show?”

Miranda was a bit surprised he had taken so long to ask her out again, but decided to play coy. “I don’t know, Major. I’m just …”

“Just dinner, then. No expectations. Food … some nice wine, perhaps? Quiet conversation … you must have a lot of stories concerning your time with Cerberus, or your work on the Lazarus project, or … about your sister. I can regale you with tales of spending five, six months inside a Reaper, traveling at some god-awful multiple of light speed. It’ll be fun, and I’ll have to leave in a few weeks … I need to be at Grissom Station before the 18th of February. What do you say?”

Miranda thought for a few moments before deciding that she really wanted a break from the ship. “Okay Major, sounds like fun, only … I can’t have too much wine. Stuff goes straight to my head, and I have to be capable of functioning in the CIC the next morning. Send me a text with the date and time.”

Alenko rose to leave. “I’ll do it. Talk to you soon.”
Fondant potatoes (pommes fondant), is a method of preparing potatoes that traditionally involves cutting them into cylinders, browning the ends, and then slowly roasting them in butter and stock.
And he took her in his arms and kissed her under the sunlit sky, and he cared not that they stood high upon the walls in the sight of many. — J.R.R. Tolkien

**Luciola:** Lightning bugs or Fireflies, collectively known as hotaru (蛍); highly significant in Japanese culture and folklore as symbols of the hitodama (人魂 or 人玉), the souls of the newly dead.

♦ ANADIUS · HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦

Iringù-Eßizkur eased her massive structure through the debris-laden area of space near the former headquarters of the Illusive Man and Cerberus. Liara T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian had entered the station just long enough to search for and perform a retrieval of all the encrypted data files left behind by Jack Harper when he abandoned the station in order to take a hands-on approach to dealing with the united opposition of the galaxy’s dominant races to the destruction being wrought by the Reapers.

With Iringù-Eßizkur’s assistance, the asari archeologist expected to decrypt the files in Harper’s personal records; she hoped there would be a record of other Cerberus space stations that might hold cloned bodies of Commander Shepard.

Iringù-Eßizkur scanned each derelict ship she encountered on her seemingly meandering path through the debris. The wreckage contained all the things one would expect to find after any ship-to-ship battle in space. Every shattered vessel had shed its human crew – most had simply been ejected intact into the emptiness of space, the bodies numbering in the many hundreds, rather than the many thousands floating in the void about Earth … or the number of spaced turians and krogan about Palaven.

There were also many, many partial remains—dismembered torsos, arms, legs and more—organic remains of people that had been violently ripped apart either by explosions or from being caught in a compartment decompressing through a small hole torn in the pressure hull. Reddish splotches were randomly spread throughout the debris field, the frozen remnants of the blood that had spilled from people’s bodies.

There were diaphanous clouds of Helium-3, still being dispersed by the solar wind from the dying star Anadius, along with glittering bits of refined eezo. Freed from the electro-mechanical constraints created by human ingenuity, these tiny fragments of eezo sparkled and flashed upon contact with her kinetic barriers, very similar in appearance to Luciola, a species of bioluminescent flying beetle originating on Earth.

Additionally, her scans continued to reveal great amounts of shattered amorphous and semicrystalline polymers, fragments of ceramic strips from smashed diffuse radiator arrays (DRAs), and large quantities of radioactive debris from destroyed fusion reactors.

She had to avoid the numerous cold metal fragments; although many were of moderate size, some were quite large, nearly intact, and seemingly capable of possessing life sustaining atmosphere. Despite extensive, high-powered scans, Iringù-Eßizkur could detect no signs of organic life within
any of the heavy-weapons ravished starships in close proximity to Anadius, nor had she expected to, as so much time had passed since this battle had taken place.

Dr T’Soni. Have either you or Garrus Vakarian decided on a new destination?

Liara jumped at the interruption to her thoughts. She had discovered a list of Cerberus operations, including space stations, and was a bit surprised to discover how little she had known or been able to learn about the Illusive Man’s organization, despite having all the resources of the Shadow Broker at her disposal. “Iringu-EBizkur … you startled me,” she squeaked. Taking a deep breath, she continued, “We are still researching the list of stations having Cerberus connections. Have you discovered anything of interest in the debris field?”

There is nothing of interest or value here. Any survivors of the conflict would have long since perished if they were not rescued within a galactic week. We should move on.

“Agreed, Iiringu-EBizkur. You may begin moving to the Strenuus System… there should be an immense station, also abandoned, in a geosynchronous orbit above Thesalcon. It is the station where Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor first took Commander Shepard to meet with the Illusive Man. It was also the construction site of the Normandy SR-2.”

It will be as you wish, Doctor T’Soni. Expect a travel time of 4.7 hours.

CAPTAIN YUÁN XIÜLÁN’S QUARTERS, SSV HONG KONG II

Miranda Lawson looked at herself in the full-length mirror, twisting her body this way and that in an effort to see herself from every angle. Finally taking pity on her, Xiülán held up her omnitool and had it generate an image from the rear; this she projected onto a pop-up screen on her desk. “Miranda, there is nothing wrong with the way that dress fits your … rear end. You’re a woman, and you have a butt. What part of those two facts are you having a problem with?”

The dress was beautifully made, red with black trim. It wasn’t as if it were very revealing. Even though it was sleeveless, the neckline in front was relatively modest, accented with a triple strand of pearls; the scoop cut at the rear exposed a lot of her back without being excessive. The hem brushed the lower third of her calves, but sported a thigh-high slit up the left side so she could walk at a normal pace. Dark hose and black round-toe pumps with moderate heels complemented the outfit, and a lacy black shawl would protect her from any perceived chill in the artificial evening air of the perpetually climate controlled Citadel.

“I don’t know, Xiülán. I just feel … like I don’t deserve to have this, these clothes, to be going out to dinner with an interesting man.” Miranda touched her fingertips to her temples, the slightest hint of biotic glow escaping. Embarrassed, she hurriedly pulled her hands down.

“You’re thinking like a victim again, Miranda; that is the one title to which you can no longer claim,” Xiülán continued in a soothing voice. “You are a survivor. After what you went through in Vancouver, you can certainly survive an evening with an honorable, decent man. It’ll be a piece of cake, you’ll see. I won’t be with you, but even if I was, I want you to realize I wouldn’t be holding your hand through dessert and an after dinner cognac, okay? You’ll do just fine. Just remember your mantra.”

Miranda nodded as she whispered, “May the Goddess lead me from the dark to the light.” It was one of the coping mechanisms she had learned during her first meeting with Sha’ira.

“Do you know where Major Alenko is planning to take you for dinner?”
“He didn’t tell me the name of the restaurant … just said it’s an intimate place serving Thessian cuisine in a quiet atmosphere.”

“Thessian?” Xiūlán asked with a smile. “Then I expect you’re in for a treat, Ms Lawson. The few asari restaurants close to Alliance docks are all very good … excellent food, expert cooks and staff, and their wines and beverages are all superb.”

“With the exception of the snacks we were served in Tevos’ chambers, I don’t think I’ve ever had asari food … certainly not a sit-down dinner. Do you have any suggestions?”

Xiūlán thought for a few moments before replying. “Grilled maanru, accompanied by spiced ke’ah, various flavors of uloth—the asari equivalent of cheese—and yefal. You’ll want to have plenty of Elasa with which to wash it all down. If you want desert, have a small Chandra sweet cake and a cup of Kaffe.” With a snarky expression, she noted, “Your shift starts at 0730 tomorrow. Want me to delay your start time by four hours?”

Miranda looked surprised. “Why Captain, you must realize I’d never allow myself to become so besotted with wine that I’d not be able to perform my duties the next day.”

“Are you going to remove that eye patch for the evening?”

“I’ve been keeping it on out of habit, I guess.” A light chuckle, then, “Would you mind assisting me?”

Xiūlán brought her hands up to Lawson’s face as she said, “Not at all.” Miranda held the patch itself away from her face as Xiūlán gently used her fingers to lift the band from in and around the specialist’s hair, which had grown somewhat since she had been hospitalized on the Citadel. Miranda blinked as her left eye acclimated to the bright lights in the compartment. “How does it look?”

Xiūlán carefully inspected each of Miranda’s eyes before concluding, “I think the doctor is correct … You should stop wearing the patch. The color of your left eye varies only slightly from that of your right, and I doubt Alenko will notice much of anything about you, except how nicely that dress flatters your figure.”

“Captain!” Miranda’s blush nearly matched her dress. “Really! I would hope he’d want to look at my face when we talk. It may still have a few scars, but I think it’s healed quite nicely.”

“It has,” Xiūlán replied with a smile. Her omnitool came alive with an almost imperceptible chime as she concluded, “Keep reminding yourself of that when you’re having dinner. The only reason anybody would stare is because you’re stunningly beautiful, Miri …” Taking a moment to inspect her omnitool, she announced, “… and, it would appear there is an Alliance Major waiting at the air lock to accompany you to dinner. Touchup your makeup while I greet him.” Xiūlán stood and stretched, before leaving the compartment to say hello to Major Alenko.

♦ STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦

Iringù-E Bizkur decelerated rapidly as she entered the region near the gas giant Thesalgon. She had detected the unmistakable signature of a human-made structure orbiting the planet at a mean distance of 827,550 kilometers above the cloud tops. The Repository slowed as she approached the station, her scans making her confident there was no life aboard, organic or inorganic. »Dr T’Soni, I am within 10,000 Km of Minuteman Station … reducing my closing velocity.«
“Energize your barriers Iringù-Eßizkur, and approach with caution,” Liara responded. “At last report, Cerberus had installed a number of automated defenses to protect the station; those are probably still active, despite the station’s apparent lack of lifeforms.”

>Raising barriers, reducing approach velocity. Standby … Scanning again for lifeforms.<

Liara and Garrus were looking at a magnified view of the still distant station when six brilliant flashes of light, white-hot in appearance with blue tinges, appeared from either end of the straight habitat section attached to the semi-circular power section; it quickly became apparent to each of them they were being fired upon. “That’s weapons fire, Iringù-Eßizkur,” Garrus remarked. “Avoid those beams!”

The view of the station abruptly shifted to the right side of their monitor as Iringù-Eßizkur silently made a hard turn to her left and accelerated away. Liara quickly adjusted the monitor to display the view from behind; the station appeared to switch to the left edge of their view as Iringù-Eßizkur completed her 180 degree turn and increased her speed. The twelve bolts of blue-tinged white converged into an apparently single deadly energy beam; once the particle beams reached maximum velocity, they appeared to lose ground as the Repository continued to accelerate to near FTL.

Turning to her left again, Iringù-Eßizkur traveled parallel to the station in order to determine if the shots were tracking her course changes. When the particle beams continued on their original course into deep space, Garrus gave a sigh of relief.

“Looks just like Thanix weapons fire … I’m glad they’re not tracking our movement. What was your distance from the station when it fired, Iringù-Eßizkur?”

>Approaching 8500 Km, Garrus Vakarian. There are twenty-four heavy-weapons emplacements on the habitat section of the station; another twenty medium-weapon emplacements are active along the semi-circular power section. There are a number of light weapons active on the main command and control tower. I can stand off from the station at 10,000 Km and neutralize them with my main weapon, if you desire.<

“That would be nice, Iringù-Eßizkur,” Garrus replied, “but not necessary. Any use of your main weapon would most like cause damage to ancillary systems and structures.”

Liara added, “Iringù-Eßizkur. I would also advise against using force … I expect the VI running those defenses would begin targeting you as soon as you fire, no matter your distance from the station. Heavy weapons range is probably 12 to 15,000 Km, maybe more. Perhaps you can disable the weapons’ VI from that distance … any possibility that it’s Reaper tech?”

>Scanning… < Iringù-Eßizkur went silent for a number of seconds before answering the asari’s inquiry. >The VI’s design and programming appears to be solely the result of human design, which may account for its seemingly hostile attitude towards me. I will attempt to overload it.< The feminine voice of the Destroyer fell silent for a number of minutes as she cruised past the station at a seemingly safe distance; the error of her hypothesis concerning the VI’s programming became rapidly apparent as eighteen distinct points of light appeared and lengthened into the unmistakable trails of Thanix weapons fire, each beam a lethal mixture of molten iron, uranium and tungsten solidifying into a projectile traveling at a significant fraction of light speed.

>I made an error in judgement, Garrus Vakarian. < Iringù-Eßizkur said as she turned and accelerated away from the station. >The VI’s reaction to my attempt at overloading it can be seen behind my structure. I fear what will happen if even one of those projectiles reaches me. My barrier cannot stop it, and my structure has insufficient strength to withstand its impact.< Iringù-Eßizkur had turned
away from the course the weapons fire was following; the station VI had fired a spread, each projectile following a slightly different trajectory. To Liara, it appeared as a lethal cone, intended to stop any attempt at escape by inundating the area Iringû-Ebïzkur had been moving through. Fortunately, the projectiles would not deviate from their course—Iringû-Ebïzkur only had to avoid getting in their path to keep from getting hit.

Garrus growled, his sub-harmonics adding an especially dark note to the tone. “That VI is adapting to Iringû-Ebïzkur’s movements, Liara. If we’re going to gain entry, we may need to do so from the Normandy. The ship still has Cerberus tech installed, along with all the Reaper tech, and I’ll just bet Specialist Traynor would be able to kick that VI’s ass before it could calculate a response.”

“Agreed,” came Liara’s reply. “Additionally, Normandy has the benefit of Commander Shepard’s presence in the computer core. If she and Samantha Traynor cannot break that Cerberus VI, then I expect no one will be able to gain entry to the station, and we need to get inside! I believe there are still clone bodies in storage there.

Garrus nodded as he flared his mandibles slightly. “Iringû-Ebïzkur, please contact Harbinger. Explain the situation here and ask him to convey our conversation to the Normandy CO and Commander Shepard.”

“I will convey your request. Do you have another destination in mind?”

Liara looked at Garrus and asked, “How are the supplies holding out? Do we have enough food and water to stay out here a while longer?”

“We have enough to stay out another thirty days, if need be, but… that includes travel time back to the Citadel.” Garrus paused to think for a moment, then concluded with, “We’ll be unable to use the relay in Pax, so Iringû-Ebïzkur’s FTL capabilities would need to be utilized.”

“Okay … Iringû-Ebïzkur, stay in this system for now. We can work on decrypting the Illusive Man’s files from Cronos Station. I want to find Lazarus Station, and I expect it’ll be in this nebula.”

“I question your hypothesis, T’Soni Doctor. Why would the Illusive Man have three stations in the same nebula?”

“Miranda utilized a UT-47 shuttlecraft to escape the station with Shepard and Jacob Taylor, so it cannot be too many light years from Minuteman. May as well find it, if we can.” Directing her attention to the console beside her, she added, “Help me decrypt the Illusive Man’s files, Iringû-Ebïzkur. There must be information in those databases concerning Cerberus operations, in this nebula and elsewhere.”

“As you wish, Doctor T’Soni.”

♦ BLUE TIDES RESTAURANT · CITADEL ♦

As Miranda Lawson accompanied Major Alenko from the lobby into the spacious but dimly illuminated dining area of the asari-owned restaurant, she felt as if every eye in the place was following her progress. Despite her outward appearance of calm, she tightened her grip on Kaidan’s arm ever so slightly, enough so that he glanced at her and whispered, “You look beautiful tonight, Miranda. If people are staring, it’s because of your beauty, and perhaps a bit of jealousy that you’d choose to be seen on the arm of an Alliance officer.” He chuckled lightly as he added, “Hell, I’m jealous of me.”
She responded to this by pressing her body towards him ever so slightly, just enough to get his attention without garnering increased attention from the patrons conversing in low voices over their dinners. The majority of the patrons appeared to be asari, with a number of humans and a few salarians and, of some surprise to Miranda, turians.

She whispered the question to Kaidan as the asari hostess stopped at a table in a secluded corner towards the rear, “Do they serve dextro here as well?”

Kaidan bent down from behind to answer as she took her seat and he pushed her chair in. “Of course. Lots of turians on the station … wouldn’t make sense to exclude them.”

The hostess smiled as she handed each of them a menu in the form of a flat datapad. “You may place orders for your beverages from these devices. If you wish to speak with a member of our staff concerning your meal choices, press the icon on the front.”

Kaidan thanked her as Miranda looked for and found the icon—a graphical representation of an asari’s head depicted from the left side. Looking up at Alenko, she smiled and said, “I’d like a glass of Elasa to start.”

Alenko grinned as she placed her order; he was a bit surprised to find one of his own favorites on the list. “I’ll be damned! They have TM88 Peruvian Whiskey here.” Punching in an order for a glass of the golden liquid, he smiled at Miranda while glancing at the menu. “The main courses here generally consist of some kind of fish, accompanied by various greens, breads and cheeses. All of it is naturally infused with eezo, which will probably have us glowing blue by the time we get out of here tonight.”

Miranda hummed as she observed, “I’ve had some of these during a visit to Councilor Tevos office. Maanru is a type of shoaling fish common off the coast of Armali … there is also tuinnín, milder in flavor than maanru. Then there’s Galea, an asari fighting fish.”

The hostess brought their drinks to the table—Miranda’s Elasa was in a long stemmed glass, while Alenko’s whiskey was in a large tumbler. “Have you made your dinner choices?” the asari asked with a smile.

Miranda said with no hesitation, “Tuinnín, lightly grilled … and a salad with yefal, uloth and torthaí … oh, and a side of spiced ke’ah.”

If the hostess was shocked by Miranda’s choices, made with the apparent confidence that came from time on Thessia, she didn’t show it. “And for the major?”

Kaidan looked at Miranda for inspiration—she in turn silently mouthed the word ‘galea’.

Looking up at the asari with an outward expression of confidence, he replied, “I’ll have the same as the young woman, except I’d like to try the galea.”

Saying, “I’ll have your salads right out,” the hostess picked up their menus with a smile and disappeared.

“You seem quite knowledgeable concerning asari foods, Miranda.” Kaidan said. “I hope my trust in you hasn’t been misplaced.”

Miranda grinned in a slightly wicked manner. “The galea can be deadly if it’s not prepared with attention to detail. In addition to biotics, it uses poison to assist in its kills, and care must be taken to not rupture the venom sacks during its preparation.”
“So, our second dinner together and already you’re trying to poison me,” Kaidan said with a grimace.

“Not at all,” came the rejoinder. “The chef undoubtedly knows how to safely prepare the fish for consumption; otherwise, it wouldn’t be on the menu. I, on the other hand, have absolutely no knowledge about how to prepare it, so you’d probably be wise to avoid anything I prepare in a kitchen.”

Kaidan took a sip of whiskey as he watched her over the rim of the glass. Setting it back on the table, he said “I just realized what’s different about you tonight … you’re not wearing an eyepatch!”

Miranda blushed slightly. “Surgery was a success, Major. I can see as well as I ever did, so … what do you think? Do I look better without it?”

“You’re beautiful, Miranda … with … or without that eyepatch. I’m glad the docs were able to restore … ah, replace your eye.”

The arrival of their salads and spiced ke’ah rescued Kaidan from having to say any more about Miranda’s hospital visits, as they both began sampling the delicious cheeses and ke’ah, along with the greens and mixed fruits. When their fish arrived a short time later, Miranda was able to show Kaidan the proper way to enjoy it all.

Picking up two of the large green leaves from the plate between them, she nested them in one hand. “The greens are called yefal,” she said. Scooping a spoonful of ke’ah onto the leaves, she followed immediately with a thin layer of uloth, added a generous portion of tuinnín, and finished by topping it with a spoonful of a thick sauce from a selection that occupied the center of the table arrangement. Rolling it all together into what closely resembled a Japanese leaf roll, she took a bite and chewed. “Uuumph! That is delicious.”

She watched as Kaidan attempted to emulate her expertise with eating asari cuisine. He took a bite, chewed and swallowed before remarking, “That doesn’t need whisky for an accompaniment … it needs beer.” Catching the eye of the hostess, he asked for a glass of whatever beer they had available, as long as it wasn’t batari. He had seen Shepard chug several ales in the Dark Star Lounge once … the third one had actually put her on her ass.

As they were eating, Miranda said, “So, you still plan on transferring to Grissom Station to help restart the academy there?”

“It’s not just for biotics … never was. The Ascension Project was the main program of the school, but it was designed to serve any student pursuing an education in math, science and the liberal arts.” Kaidan paused as he thought back to the Reaper War. “The Cerberus attack caused a lot of damage to the interior, killed a number of people. We managed to beat back the attackers and rescue the students remaining there, along with Jack and Kahlee Sanders. The station apparently survived the Reapers, although Elysium didn’t fare so well.”

“But the remaining colonists are attempting to rebuild there, are they not?”

“Rebuilding is taking place in Illyria, but it’ll be a long time before the planet is back to anything approaching normal.” Kaidan downed the rest of his beer. “There were over eight million people on the planet before the Reapers … an accurate count hasn’t been made, but reports indicate that maybe a million or so, of all races, still remain.”

Miranda sipped her Elasa as she thought about the colony. “Elysium seemingly cannot shake its streak of ill luck … Ten years before the Reapers, it was Elanos Haliat leading the Skylillian Blitz.
But the remaining colonists will recover … and rebuild. Elysium’s survival will be key to the repair and survival of Grissom Station.”

Kaidan took another bite of his meal, then ordered another beer before responding. “You’re probably correct. In any event, I hope I can contribute to getting the Ascension Project back up and running … get the entire school back to what it excelled at doing.”

The two humans continued to enjoy each other’s company as they finished their meals. When all the plates were empty, the hostess asked if they would care for a bit of dessert, prompting Miranda to ask for a Chandra sweetcake and a cup of Kaffe for each of them.

“You certainly know your way around an asari menu, Miranda,” Kaidan quietly observed. “I thought I’d surprise you with this place, but …” the major reached across the table and gently took her hand, “… it’s you that has surprised me.”

Every thought running through Miranda’s mind demanded she withdraw her hand; she breathed a little deeper as she mentally recited her mantra. She felt strange, as if the eezo infused drink was affecting her, but quickly decided that her body was attempting to betray her … she felt warmth, rising from her core, causing her to shift her weight on her chair. She looked in amazement at the hand on top of hers; she was even more surprised when her own hand rotated around under that hand to grip Kaidan’s fingers.

Blue eyes came up to intensely study the whiskey brown eyes watching her. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been comfortable in the company of a man, Kaidan.” She looked down again, to watch a thumb slowly, gently caressing the back of her hand. The warmth in her core continued to spread, as suggestions of need … of desire … feelings she had not had … had not allowed herself to feel for what seemed like forever … slowly broke down some of the barriers she had raised to protect herself from further emotional injury.

The corners of Alenko’s mouth turned up slightly in response. “Then I’m honored to be the man you feel comfortable with, Miranda.”

Taking a final sip of Kaffe, she swallowed, then cleared her throat to make sure her voice would still work before saying in a soft voice, “I need to visit the facilities.”

Kaidan released her hand—why did she suddenly feel empty?—and stood, coming around the table to pull her chair back slightly. “I’ll be right back.” Kaidan retook his chair and watched as she threaded her way confidently through the dining area. Every male in the room seemed to notice the striking woman with the mane of medium length, dark blonde hair. Kaidan briefly cast a wary look at each of them, wanting to see if there was any hostility in their eyes. Seeing nothing more than idle curiosity or honest admiration, he made eye contact with the hostess, who promptly came to the table.

“What may I do for you, sir?”

Kaidan smiled up at her as he said, “I think we’re done here … just need to settle up the bill.”

“Of course, Major. Simply use your omnitool to make the transfer to the restaurant …” she activated a small terminal in the center of the table as she spoke, “… through this interface.”

Kaidan thanked her as he made the requisite entries in his omnitool; it chimed as it completed the transaction, just in time for Miranda’s return through the dining area. Alenko still couldn’t believe his good fortune at being accompanied by this stunningly attractive woman. Standing as she reached the table, he said, “We’re all done here. Shall I accompany you back to the Hong Kong, or would
you like to go for a walk, see some of the sights?”

Miranda wasn’t ready for this wonderful evening to end just yet. “Let’s go for a walk, Major. It’s still early … if I return to the ship, I’ll probably just work on some reports or something else equally boring.” Taking his arm, she pressed her body into his side and said, “Let’s go.”

♦ SYSTEMS ALLIANCE DOCK CHARLIE-SEVEN · CITADEL ♦

Requiring less down time than humans did not mean Edi needed no periods of rest—the bio/mechanical female generally, for all practical purposes, took what amounted to a daily ‘nap’, whereupon she would sit in the co-pilot’s chair on the bridge of the Normandy, lock all her servos in order to remain stationary in the chair, and shut down most of her mechanical functions in order to perform internal maintenance of her systems.

This did not mean she was unaware of what transpired near her, both within and outside of Normandy, and so it was that she ‘heard’ the incoming communication from Iringù-Eßizkur, relaying the Destroyer-Repository’s conversation with Dr T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian concerning the Cerberus facility known as Minuteman Station. The message had been meant for Harbinger, but Specialist Traynor had managed to enable the Normandy’s communications array to receive any of the messages Iringù-Eßizkur sent, whether to Žiuk’Durmah (currently in a state of hibernation at the end of the dreadnaught docks), Esiz’Qür, or Harbinger.

Completing the internal repairs currently in progress, she unlocked all her servos, stood from her chair and left the bridge to find Captain Cody.

♦ SSV NORMANDY · DECK TWO, CONFERENCE ROOM ♦

Captain Yuán Xiùlán walked into the Normandy’s conference room to find Edi and Captain Cody already sitting and talking; Cody looked up as she entered and said, “Good to see you, Captain. Edi was just telling me about the message Harbinger received from the Horsehead Nebula.”

Xiùlán directed her attention to Edi as she took a seat across the table. “You intercepted a message from … ?”

“The Horsehead Nebula, Captain … more specifically, from Iringù-Eßizkur, sent at the request of Dr T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian.”

“They’ve been out of touch since they left Normandy,” Xiùlán said with a small frown. “I trust nothing bad has happened.”

“They’re fine, Captain. As the relay in Pax is still inoperable, they’ve requested that Harbinger transport Normandy and her crew to meet them in the Strenuus System … they have located the Minuteman Station in orbit around Thesalgon. Apparently the station VI is still very much active, and does not care for Reapers; they were fired upon with Thanix weaponry from 10,000 Km. Dr T’Soni believes the station’s human population has long since deserted.” Looking at Cody, she added, “Harbinger has not requested our participation … yet. I expect we will hear from him shortly, and for once, it would be nice to be ahead of the curve.”

Cody had been silent to this point, sipping coffee from a mug emblazoned with the Systems Alliance logo. “Why can’t we just go directly there, Edi?” Riding around inside a Repository—a machine that had been a Reaper for its entire existence—was not high on Cody’s list of ‘must do again’ experiences; the one-time trip from Arcturus Stream to the Charon Relay inside the massive organic
machine was not something he felt the need to repeat any time soon.

Edi brought up her omnitool and entered several commands, resulting in a representation of Inner Council Space and Earth Alliance Space being displayed in the middle of the conference table. “The Pax relay in the Horsehead Nebula has yet to be repaired. The most efficient travel path will be to the Sol System; from there, Harbinger can utilize his own FTL capability to reach Pax through deep space, without using the relays. Best estimate of travel time is five, maybe six days at maximum FTL.”

Xiùlán asked, “What kind of velocity are we talking about? That time-frame sounds awfully fast for the distance involved.”

Edi’s response left both captains in stunned amazement. “Harbinger can achieve approximately 14,200 times light speed—that’s 4.27 billion Km/sec. Still, it was not fast enough for the program created by the Leviathans, thus, the creation of the Mass Relays.”

Cody looked at Edi, puzzlement plain in his expression. “Even the fastest Alliance vessels can only manage 14.9 million or so with their engines pushed just past a hundred percent of rated power, and then for only a very short time before things begin to overheat. Billion? Doesn’t seem possible.”

“The size of the Eezo core within each of the Nazara class Reapers exceeds that of even our dreadnaught class vessels by many orders of magnitude, but their maximum velocity was still not enough to rapidly conquer the vastness of this galaxy. The program created by the Leviathans needed each harvest to take place following a strict schedule, something impossible to achieve without a method of instantaneous transit between widely scattered systems,” Edi explained. “Thus, the Mass Relay network, with the Citadel as the master relay.”

“But why do they need the Normandy? We would have to recall all the crew members currently on leave.”

Edi actually smiled. “There are two people assigned to this vessel that should be able to break the VI controlling the station’s defenses. Samantha Traynor, who is currently on leave, and Commander Shepard. Of course, Traynor could be temporarily assigned to the Hong Kong, but I believe it will be more efficient to temporarily assign Specialist Miranda Lawson to this ship.”

“And why do we need Lawson,” Cody asked.

“She transported Shepard from the Lazarus Station to Minuteman when it was overrun by mechs reprogrammed by a traitor within Cerberus,” Edi responded. “Lawson was the lead engineer and director for the Lazarus Project that brought Shepard back to life. There are supposed to be cloned bodies in storage at Minuteman, but Iringù-Eßizkur cannot get close without taking fire from heavy weapons. Dr T’Soni believes the Normandy would be able to safely dock with the station, as the ship was designed and built by Cerberus … and, launched from there on its maiden voyage.”

Cody nodded, thinking about what needed to be done as Edi explained, then looked at Xiùlán as he quietly responded, “I’ll have XO Adams put in the request, but I’m thinking we’ll simply leave Lawson on the Hong Kong. Harbinger has room for both frigates in that cavern it refers to as a hanger, and having a second ship to fly as a wingman should give us an advantage over that VI.” Smiling again, he asked, “Ready for a bit of adventure, Captain Yuán?”

Xiùlán really didn’t need to think about the situation, as she was thinking along the same lines as her former CO. “Your idea has merit, Captain … Having the Hong Kong sitting here docked will certainly do you no good in the nebula. I’ll start making preparations for departure. Let me know when you plan to get under way.”
Miranda could not remember having had a nicer evening out with a man … any man … as she snuggled into Kaidan’s side during their slow walk back to the Hong Kong. She was mentally struggling with herself; feeling a physical need for him … wanting him to quench the small fire he had inadvertently ignited in her core, yet absolutely dreading the intimacy that would be involved. Damn it! He’s a human, not some monstrous animal pretending to be … not like those bastards that tortured me in Vancouver. How can I tell him? What can I say, or do … I need him to … her thoughts continued unabated … tumultuous, churning. She had almost stopped walking several times, had almost turned and pinned him to the wall of whatever building they were passing. Damn!

For his part, Kaidan was enjoying the warmth and feel of Miranda’s body as they slowly strolled arm-in-arm back towards the docks. My god, her scent! I could drown in her scent … a hint of cinnamon, a touch of Eezo, overlaid with the slightest bit of … what in Hell was that? Citrus?

Making up his mind, he glanced around nervously, then stopped and gently spun her towards him, saying, “Miranda, I have wanted to do this since the first time I laid eyes on you.” So saying, he slowly leaned in, watching her eyes as his face closed on hers, searching for any hint of fear or panic. Detecting none, he lightly brushed his lips across hers; she tilted her head slightly and, reaching around with her free arm, embraced him tightly across his back as she answered the invitation by tightly pressing her slightly parted lips to his.

Teasing with the tip of her tongue, she was rewarded with his own teasing gesture; they sparred for a moment before he capitulated, allowing the invader to caress his own tongue as he gently fondled hers. Breaking the kiss to take a breath, the soft skin around Miranda’s blue eyes crinkled at the corners, indicating amusement. “So, was that kiss as good as the first time you kissed me?”

“I’m really out of practice,” came the answer. Suddenly becoming aware of the luscious curves of this woman’s body pressed tightly chest-to-thigh against his, he fought the resulting heat in his groin, finally giving up and pushing himself back a bit further in order to keep from embarrassing himself … and her.

A genuine smile appeared on her face as she took notice of his hasty retreat, asking, “Something troubling you, Major?”

Even in the dim light of the Citadel evening, his blush, creeping up his neck from the open collar of his shirt to flood his cheeks, was rather noticeable. Chuckling, he said, “My body is reminding me how long it’s been since I’ve been … intimate … with a woman, Miranda, especially one so beautiful. I hope I have not offended you.”

Miranda still had her hands on his waist; she pulled him to her, pressing her breasts into his chest … God, I could do this all night! … as she reached in to kiss him again. “I think I’d be offended if I didn’t have that effect on you, Kaidan,” she said softly, before slowly turning and, with one arm linked into his, began slowly walking towards the docked ships. Dammit! What’s the matter with me!? I have never come on to a man like this! Am I really that horny? Boldly continuing on, she added, “You know, I don’t have to be at my duty station on the Hong Kong until 0730. It’s still early … would you like me to accompany you to your quarters, maybe spend a few hours reminiscing? We could have a drink or two, maybe talk about our lives … before the war … before the Collectors?” She looked at him through slitted eyelids as she rubbed the back of his hand with a thumb.

Kaidan didn’t even have to think about her offer. “I would like that, Miranda … very much.” Picking up his pace slightly, he changed direction and headed for his quarters.
Between Tides

Everyone has secrets. It's just a matter of finding out what they are. — Stieg Larsson, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo

SSV NORMANDY · DOCKED AT THE CITADEL

Engineering Specialist Kenneth Donnelly nervously waved his hand through the red door locked icon signifying the hatch in front of which he was standing was locked; as he heard the faint chime of the entry request inside the compartment, he thought about the commitment he had made to Gabby at dinner Monday night. He was head over heels in love with the woman, and had used their dinner date to propose marriage. With only a week left of the thirty days leave he’d been granted, the sudden realization that he and Gabby might be required to serve on two different ships, or perhaps be grounded entirely, had driven him to seek out Captain Cody.

A voice within the loft said “Come!” as the electronic lock disengaged, changing the glowing interface to bright green; the hatch opened with a metal-sliding-past-metal sound as the multiple sections slid into pockets on either side of the bulkhead. As Donnelly hesitated, the voice called out again, “Come in … Petty Officer Donnelly, yes?”

Captain Bill Cody stepped out from the alcove formed by the model ship display, desk, and bathroom bulkhead; he motioned for the nervous crewman to join him on a chair in the lower level, speaking over his shoulder as he took the steps down and padded quietly across the steel deck to sit in the leather couch. Referring to a datapad he’d carried with him, he looked up at Kenneth as the young engineer carefully sat down in the matching chair placed at a right angle to the couch. “So, you’re requesting a transfer out of the engineering department to a related area on the ship?”

“Aye, Sir,” Kenneth answered, his nervousness at meeting privately with his CO plain in the increased thickness of his Scottish brogue. “Ye see, Sur, I’ve juist asked SCPO Daniels tae be mah guidwife, ne’er giein’ ony thought tao oor positions oan th’ Normandy, ‘n’ ah ken th’ Alliance frowns oan merrit couples servin’ th’gither oan a ship.”

Cody smiled as he thought about how to reply. “First, let me congratulate you on your impending marriage, Mr Donnelly.” Cody reached over with his hand extended to give Ken a handshake, then turned his attention to his datapad. “Concerning married couples serving together on a ship, there really are no hard and fast rules prohibiting it, although history does seem to indicate an ingrained bias against it.” Cody crossed his legs as he leaned back into the couch, hoping to somehow put this nervous crewman at ease.

“It has pretty much been left up to the ship’s CO to approve or reject the practice; my own inclination is to approve a transfer of one or the other of the people, or even both of them, depending on how losing a skilled petty officer affects the ship and crew.”

Donnelly started to say something, but waited for Cody to finish. “I need you to understand, Ken … this ship is not a cruiser. Vessel this size, finding a berth for a cohabiting couple is impossible, unless …” here he made a point of looking around his own quarters, “… one of the married people is the captain and has access to quarters like this … certainly an exception, as I know for a fact the Hong Kong doesn’t have captain’s quarters this expansive … or this private.”

Cody studied his datapad for a few moments, scrolling the screens up and down in an attempt to find any information concerning a married couple assigned to a ship. Finally abandoning the search, he
stood up, prompting Kenneth to stand as well. “Give me a chance to talk to Greg Adams, Ken. I would hate to lose you to a shore facility or another ship just because you’re going to marry the best propulsion engineer I’ve ever met. You still have a week left on your leave … go enjoy it. I’ll contact you when I have something to tell you.”

Ken shook Cody’s hand and thanked him for his time, even though he was disappointed that Captain Cody hadn’t suggested a way for him to stay on the ship. He felt his knowledge of the entire engineering department gave him an edge on some outsider, so he tried one more tack before he left. “Captain, Specialist Daniels will be purely in charge of the propulsion systems. With respect, sir, the environmental systems haven’t been regularly maintained or monitored since the ship was launched, as there wasn’t enough personnel aboard. Ah wish be a guid fit fur th’ jab, sir… ‘n’ Gabby ‘n’ me… weel, wur nae merrit yet.”

Cody smiled at this. “You must really enjoy working on this ship, Donnelly.”

“I’ve bin a ships equipment worker sin ah graduated school, Captain… it’s in mah blood. Bit serving’ oan this, or ony ither ship in th’ fleet wid be an empty existence if ah wis separated fae Gabby… er, I mean, Senior Chief Petty Officer Daniels.” Donnelly paused for a moment, trying to think of a compelling reason for the captain to keep him on the ship. “We’ve bin working’ together ever since th’ Perugia, Sir.”

“An assignment history that I’ll definitely consider when I make my decision, Mr Donnelly. Thanks for coming to see me.” The terminal on Cody’s desk emitted a musical, dual-tone sound to indicate an incoming message, which Donnelly took as his cue to leave. Cody followed him up the stairs to his office area, responding to the comms system as the hatch closed behind the young engineer.

A yeoman on deck two appeared on the screen, saying, “Sorry to bother you, Sir. Harbinger has contacted us, needing to speak with you in the QEC compartment.”

“Thanks, Coleen… I’ll be right down.”

Bill Cody entered the war room to discover an image of Harbinger floating above the circular situation projector. Cody continued around to the QEC entrance; walking in, he joined XO Adams, who had apparently been summoned as well.

Cody was surprised to see the images within the chamber – Dr Liara T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian stood side-by-side, waiting for Cody to arrive.

“Dr T’Soni … Vakarian … good to see both of you,” Cody said with a smile. “Where are you, and what may we do for you today?”

Liara replied, “We’re speaking to you from within Iringü-Eßizkur, currently near Thesalgon in the Horsehead Nebula. We recently visited the former headquarters of Cerberus, the so-called Cronos Station.”

Their images were somewhat pixilated and their audio flanged with delay artifacts, something Cody pointed out by saying, “It’s obvious all your audio and video is being run through the Repositories.” He then nodded his head, continuing with, “I remember the station … seems the Fifth Fleet fought a pitched battle there during the Reaper War.”

Garrus took up the explanation with, “Um, well, yes. Commander Shepard and her squad did an incredible amount of damage inside as they fought their way to the Illusive Man’s inner sanctum.” Glancing at Liara, he continued, “Fortunately, we only discovered a few automated defenses. If
there’s anyone left alive on that station, they didn’t show themselves and Iringù-Eßizkur’s scans were negative.”

Greg Adams, who had been a member of the Normandy crew during that battle, glanced at Cody briefly before speaking. “Dr T’Soni … Garrus … What did you find on that station besides bodies? I thought Shepard’s ground team did a thorough job of cleaning it out.”

Liara’s reply surprised them both. “Encrypted files, gentlemen … a lot of encrypted files, most belonging to the Illusive Man. We discovered the location of the Minuteman Station, where Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor transferred Shepard after reprogrammed synths tried to kill everyone aboard the Lazarus Research Station.”

Garrus continued by adding, “Thesalgon is a gas giant, fifth planet from Strenuus. We’re currently standing off from the planet and … Minuteman Station.”

“We believe there may be more information there concerning Cerberus research into human cloning,” Liara added. “Regrettably, the station’s automated defenses targeted Iringù-Eßizkur as a hostile—we’re unable to approach closer than about 15,000 kilometers without being fired upon.”

Cody’s voice betrayed his amazement. “I thought all the big Reapers were impervious to Alliance based weapons fire.”

“Unfortunately, Cerberus upgraded the station’s defenses to include particle beams and Thanix cannons. Iringù-Eßizkur’s kinetic barrier would not stand up to even one shot from a Thanix cannon, and her structure would most certainly be breached if she were hit. When she attempted to remotely overload the station’s VI, we were simultaneously fired on by eighteen individual cannons.”

A feminine voice to Adams right startled the two men with, “Liara … Garrus … Sounds as if you need to have the Normandy dock there, maybe send a ground team aboard?”

Adams and Cody both looked at the image of Commander Shepard as Adams said with a snarky grin, “Dammit, Commander. Sometimes I forget you are the Normandy.”

Cody grinned as well. “Shepard, this ship still has a lot of Reaper tech installed. You think we can get by those defenses any better than Iringù-Eßizkur?”

“I expect all the Cerberus tech installed in the ship’s systems would give us an edge, Captain, and I would like to see what’s inside the station that’s so important a VI is defending it against a Reaper … hell, that VI could be an AI, for all we know.”

Cody looked back at Liara. “We’ll have to run it by Admiral Hackett, and it will most likely be two or three weeks before we can get out there, Dr T’Soni. The relays still haven’t all been repaired.”

A sonorous voice, sounding as if it came from everywhere within the ship, interrupted their meeting. Cody-Captain. It would be my pleasure to once again assist Shepard-Normandy in finding what she seeks. I still have docking hardware within my structure; I could transport Normandy-Frigate and Hong Kong-Frigate to Horsehead Nebula. From there, each ship would be capable of reaching any of the three former Cerberus stations you have discussed.

Cody gave a questioning look to Liara and Garrus as he remarked, “I presume you heard all that. We still need a couple of weeks to be ready to leave the Citadel. I don’t want the first major act of my tenure as CO of this vessel to be cutting everyone’s leave short. We’re not on a wartime footing, and some of our replacement crewmen are still getting their departments squared away.” He paused
to look at Adams, then added, “Have you found the location of the Lazarus Research station, Dr T'Soni?”

Before she could respond, Harbinger answered, *This human construct is known to us. It was positioned in dark space adjacent to Strenuus, and was rumored to have been destroyed by remote detonation after Shepard-Commander escaped. Repositories believe it still resides at its original galactic coordinates, which I have just transmitted to Iringù-Eßizkur.*

Liara smiled at the two officers. “Two or three weeks will work just fine, Captain Cody. It will give Garrus and me enough time to investigate Lazarus Station, and I really want to decrypt the files recovered from Cronos. Next time we contact you, we’ll talk to the Admiral as well.”

“Sounds good, Dr T’Soni,” Cody replied. “We’ll speak with you soon.”

Liara’s hands touched a control interface out of sight in front of her, causing their images to vanish from the QEC chamber. Cody turned and walked out of the compartment, only to be surprised by the image of Harbinger, still floating just above the surface of the circular situation projector. “Harbinger? Is there anything else?”

**Cody-Captain.** *Esiz’Qür and this Repository have recovered an intact Eezo power-core that Žiuk’Durmah can utilize. Would it be possible to have the assistance of Traynor-Specialist and Tali’Zorah-General in switching Žiuk’Durmah from station power to internal power?*

Adams looked at Cody for a moment … receiving a nod of agreement, he responded, “Harbinger … We will contact the specialist and Tali’Zorah. They can communicate with you through their omnitools. Will that be satisfactory?”

**Completely, Adams-Lieutenant Commander.**

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**ALLIANCE DOCKS · CITADEL**

Tali’Zorah vas Normandy was standing near the dull black form of Žiuk’Durmah—moored at the far end of Dreadnaught Row—waiting for the arrival of Specialist Samantha Traynor. Harbinger and Esiz’Qür had recovered an intact power core from a destroyed Nazara-class Reaper in high Earth orbit; this was now being carefully installed—by the numerous Keepers assigned to the task by Harbinger—within the vast space that formed Žiuk’Durmah’s electrical distribution center.

The power core Harbinger had retrieved was somewhat larger than the one Traynor had remotely ejected; every Nazara-class Reaper was constructed with slight differences in overall size and capabilities, and Žiuk’Durmah was no exception. The newly installed core, with a corresponding increase in the volume of Eezo contained, would most likely serve to increase the upper limits of Žiuk’Durmah’s FTL capability.

Tali’s attention was drawn to the faint sound of an approaching air car, which circled around to stop some two meters behind her; the hatches opened to reveal Samantha Traynor, dressed in her rarely seen field armor, shotgun docked at the small of her back, heavy pistol on her hip. Carrying her helmet, Traynor greeted her quarian friend with an enthusiastic “Hello!” accompanied by a one-armed hug. Glancing at the reason both of them were here, she asked, “How’s the installation going, Tali? Are they getting close to loading Eezo?”

“The Keepers have just completed installation of the core retrieved by Harbinger and Esiz’Qür,” Tali responded cheerily. “Minor problems *were* encountered during the installation but were quickly
rectified. The Keepers are adding Eezo to the container.”

Traynor brought up her arm, activated her omnitool and sent a message to ‘First One’, the oldest of all the Repositories. “Harbinger … Tali and I need access to Žiuk’Durmah’s interior as we did before Javik sabotaged his power core. We need to re-enable control of his Eezo core, and assist in transferring Žiuk’Durmah’s records in your archives … and in Esiz’Qür’s archives, back to their rightful location.” After pausing to think for a few moments, she continued with, “We will need a small, independent transport to use as a shuttle … perhaps a pair of carriers similar to the one sent for my use by Iringù-Eßizkur in order to set up the new Shadow Broker offices.”

After a pause of several minutes, Traynor and Tali had their answer, in the form of two personal carriers, flying over the main body of Žiuk’Durmah to settle in front of the human and her quarian friend. Tali tentatively approached one of the machines, floating a few centimeters from the surface of the dock. “This looks just like the one we used inside Žiuk’Durmah to move between Normandy and Iringù-Eßizkur.”

Traynor nodded before placing her helmet over her head. “Probably pre-programmed to place us inside the chamber where I relieved the last Prothean of his head. You ready?”

Tali replied, “No, …” as she threw a leg over the ‘back’ of the idling machine, “… but I don’t think that makes much difference. Sooner we get over there, sooner we can be done. I want to see this big Bosh’tet flying free under his own power again.”

As soon as Samantha had boarded the second transport, both machines rose as one, spun about and headed to the main entry point at the base of the big Repository’s arms.

♦ EARTH ALLIANCE OFFICER AND CREW BILLETS · CITADEL ♦

Miranda Lawson stretched languorously, arms straight up over her head, long legs out in line with her torso, toes pointed; she had awakened to a dark room in a rather large bed, so knew she wasn’t in her berth aboard the Hong Kong. Her memories of the previous evening quickly returned as she raised her head and looked around in the dim light emanating from the room-encircling belt rail—dinner with Kaidan Alenko, a leisurely stroll back to his apartment, a nightcap of orange liqueur accompanied by conversation—a perfect conclusion to a perfect evening.

With a start, Miranda realized she needed to get back to the ship in time to begin her work shift; she activated the chrono on her omnitool—0542—and relaxed slightly. Plenty of time to get ready, return, change clothes … clothes! Just what in hell am I wearing? She eased her body out of the covers and off the bed; standing, she quickly remembered she was dressed in ‘sweatpants and shirt’ courtesy of Major Alenko; the top was at least two sizes larger than anything she needed for a proper fit, and the bottoms were large enough to succumb to gravity if she didn’t make a conscious effort to prevent their descent down her legs.

Walking carefully, she made her way to the door and quietly opened it to reveal the small living and dining area, with what could charitably be described as a kitchen, in which Kaidan Alenko was bustling about, making what smelled like … it cannot be! The cost of the ingredients would be prohibitively expensive to transport to the Citadel! But it... “Smells delicious, Major. Are you really fixing bacon and eggs?”

Kaidan spared a glance over his shoulder, returning to his task as he answered, “Good morning, Miranda. How’d you sleep?” He spared her another glance as he added, “There’s hot water for tea, if you like. Coffee’s ready as well … May as well have some food before I walk you back to your ship.”
This guy is a total gentleman, and he’s able to cook as well? Miranda walked up to the small eating area as she continued to think about the situation. If I pinch myself, will I wake up in my berth on the Hong Kong? Taking a seat astride one of the stools at the counter, she smiled appreciatively at the plate of food Kaidan placed in front of her.

“Tea or coffee, Ma’am?”

“I’d like a cup of coffee this morning.” She took a bite from one of the bacon strips on the plate. “... ummmmm ... tastes wonderful, Kaidan.” Picking up a knife and fork, she started in on the eggs and toast, with sips of coffee in between, all the while watching him surreptitiously as he filled a plate for himself and took a seat across from her.

“Everything cooked to your taste?”

Miranda wiped her mouth as she finished chewing and swallowed. “Excellent, Major. Where’d you learn to cook? I’m sure there are a few five-star chefs that should be worried about their jobs; you could probably make a lot more money working in a fancy restaurant.”

He nodded slightly as he devoured a forkful of scrambled eggs. “Breakfast is easy ... suppose I could make it as a short-order cook in some little Mom’n’Pop diner. I seriously doubt I’d have people shooting guns at me, but I enjoy being in the Alliance. Being able to occasionally cook for friends is a bonus.”

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, until Miranda said, “I really appreciate you letting me have your bed last night ... and I still feel really bad you felt it necessary to sleep out here; we’re both adults, and neither of us is committed to anyone else ... I get the distinct feeling you’re treating me like some fragile bit of porcelain. You do realize I won’t break, don’t you? So, how did that couch treat your back last night?”

Alenko grinned with his reply of, “The couch? No worse than my old berth on the Normandy. At least the noise level is a lot less in here.” Looking at her borrowed clothing, he added, “Sorry I don’t have anything more your style ...” pausing for a second, he looked pointedly at her neckline, where the sweatshirt was attempting to slide off one shoulder, then finished with, “... or your size. As for breaking you ... you had a rough time in Vancouver, Miranda. I know you’ve healed physically, but I don’t think you’ve completely healed mentally, and I won’t do anything to jeopardize that process.”

Miranda smiled at this, recalling the near argument ... disagreement, actually ... they’d had about sleepwear the previous evening. “I’m still surprised at your lack of prior planning concerning female guests that might have to spend the night,” she said with a smirk. Taking a bite of toasted bread to mask her sudden shyness, she chewed and swallowed before continuing softly, “I would suggest, if you were going to stay here any longer, you might consider allowing me to stash a few things in your dresser drawer and closet ... you know, just in case ... you might want to have me over for a visit again?”

Kaidan coughed, nearly choking on his coffee. Cheeks flushed, he studied the slanted blue cat eyes regarding him from over her own coffee mug; there was no ambivalence in her gaze ... she was seriously taking the initiative away from him. He realized that going out with Miranda Lawson again, after last night and this morning, was now out of his hands.

“I would like to see you again, Miranda. I think we can both agree that my lack of ... prior planning, as you say, would indicate I lead a rather ... solitary ... lifestyle.” Twirling the tines of his fork in a bit of egg yolk, he added, “I haven’t bothered with developing a relationship with a woman, what with the Reaper War, the Collectors, Sovereign and the Geth. Life just seemed so ... chaotic ... our future so uncertain.” Returning his gaze to her cobalt eyes, he finished with, “You are one of the
most remarkable women I’ve ever met … and I would very much like to get to know you better.”

“Ahh, but you’ll soon be leaving for Grissom Academy, and I expect the Hong Kong will be back in space soon as well. We’re both going in different directions … won’t be the same as fighting another war, but it will be some time before we see each other again.” She finished her coffee and set the mug down in front of her. “That said, neither of us will be out there … wherever that is … forever. Let’s pick this up where we leave off, Kaidan. We can stay in touch. When we manage to get back here at the same time again, I’ll treat you to dinner.”

Looking at her chrono, she winced. “Damn … I need to return to the docks. Give me a few minutes in the head?”

“You got it … Specialist Lawson,” he said with a grin. “I’ll clear the dishes in the meantime.”

♦ ALLIANCE DOCKS · CITADEL ♦

Tali’Zorah looked nervously at her human companion. Each was astride a mechanical vision from a drug-induced nightmare, with both machines inexorably drawing near the massive entry port. “As I recall, there was no atmo inside, nor was there any heat.”

Before Traynor could respond, the ancient sounding voice of Harbinger interrupted, speaking through their comms. >You will be protected, Tali’Zorah-Admiral. Each of the transports will envelope you in a kinetic barrier—this will allow you safe passage within the low atmosphere/low temperature area used to transport Normandy-frigate … and Iringù-Eßizkur.<

As Harbinger finished speaking, a blue-tinted field of energy erupted from the back of each transport and swiftly moved to the front, enveloping each rider from top to bottom, side to side. Tali looked at Traynor as she observed, “Looks like the field Žiuk’Durmah erected around Javik the instant before Garrus and I attempted to blow his head off.”

“Too bad Žiuk’Durmah didn’t allow you to finish him then,” Traynor snarked. “None of this bullshit would have been necessary.” She returned her attention to the front as their transports pierced the kinetic barrier keeping Žiuk’Durmah’s insides sealed from the Citadel’s environment. As the barriers were all being generated by similar emitters, there was no visible evidence of their passing through, no clash of dissimilar polarities.

Once inside, each transport produced an intense beam of pure white light straight ahead of them, enabling Traynor and Tali a clear view of their former docking area and the hatch protecting the compartments in which Javik had lived out his final days. Harbinger’s voice whispered in their headsets as they approached: ›If each of you would bend forward … hug the structure on which you are riding. I will guide each into the first chamber, in which artificial gravity and a heated, breathable atmosphere has been established.‹

They each complied with the request, folding their torsos down at the hips to lie astride their evil-looking transports. The compartment hatch irised open with a metallic ‘ssss-s-s-s’ as the segments slid past each other; their machines slowed to a minimum forward speed as they took up a single file formation. Traynor’s entered first, turning to the left as soon as it was clear of the hatch. Tali’s took a similar path, the energy field dissipating as it came to a stop beside Traynor’s machine.

Dismounting, their eyes still getting adjusted to the relatively dim light within the compartment, they carefully approached the doorway leading to the inner chamber, where there were several terminals that could be utilized to get Žiuk’Durmah operational again; the doorway behind them irised closed as the one in front of them slid open with a distinctive metallic hiss.
Looking at Tali, Traynor said with a sigh, “Guess we better get started.”

Without a word, Tali walked to the control console she had stood in front of not so long ago; Traynor activated the terminal she had used previously when they’d recovered Javik’s body. She entered text as she’d done previously: »Žiuk’Durmah … it is Traynor and Tali’Zorah. Please respond.«

She looked at Tali, busily writing code to reconnect Žiuk’Durmah’s cognitive functions to his newly installed core. She was also reconnecting comms, navigation, propulsion, defensive shielding, weapons functions … in short, everything the massive construct had control of right before Traynor had been forced to initiate an emergency core ejection.

Traynor was nearly ready to send a second request when a message began scrolling across the display: »Traynor-Specialist … I am puzzled. You seem to be attempting to reactivate my functions. How is this possible? It has been only a short time since last we communicated.«

Sammy grinned as she entered her reply: »Žiuk’Durmah. Harbinger and Esiz’Qür retrieved a replacement containment structure and the refined Eezo needed to fill it so you may once again fly among the stars.«

She glanced at Tali before continuing, »We will reconnect all you processes to this new core. Once you have been reactivated, Harbinger and Esiz’Qür will restore all the files you placed with them for safekeeping.«

Even as Traynor sent the last message, all the lights in the compartment came up to full brilliance, and a vibration, so slight it was nearly undetectable, could be felt in the deck beneath their feet. Žiuk’Durmah was coming back to life.

◆ FINANCIAL DISTRICT, PRESIDIUM · CITADEL ◆

- SUNDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2188 -

It had been two weeks since Miranda had met with the asari consort Sha’ira, in what had turned out to be a day-long session of mental healing, designed to teach the former Cerberus agent how to reorder and sequester the memories of her brutal treatment as a captive of Blue Suns mercenaries in Vancouver.

Captain Yuán had given Miranda leave from the Hong Kong for the day so she could meet with the consort one more time, before the ship left the Citadel for what might be an extended deployment to the border area between Inner Council and Earth Alliance Space. Unlike their first, nearly daylong meeting in the asari councilor’s office, Sha’ira had agreed to a meeting in her chambers. Miranda arrived a few minutes early, to be greeted by Nelyna, who stood and offered her hands, palms upward.

“Ms Lawson. My name is Nelyna. It is an honor to finally be able to meet you in person. Your reputation precedes you.”

Miranda placed her hands on those offered in friendship as she replied, “It is very nice to make your acquaintance, Nelyna. Is Sha’ira here this morning? I believe she is expecting me.”

Nelyna clasped Miranda’s hands for a moment, then released them, saying, “She is in her chambers, Ms Lawson. Please, go through the lounge to the stairs at the far end. I will inform her you have arrived.”
Miranda thanked her and entered the lounge area; there were a few patrons within, sitting in comfortable chairs seemingly scattered about. Each patron was being attended to by one of Sha’ira’s acolytes, none of which showed any surprise that a human female was able to simply walk straight through the large area to enter Sha’ira’s private domain.

As Miranda turned the corner and started up the elegant staircase, the door above opened to reveal the welcoming smile of the consort. Sha’ira’s voice was warm with affection as she spoke to the approaching woman. “Miranda Lawson. Welcome! It is wonderful to see you again. Please, do come in and make yourself comfortable on one of the couches. Seeing as you enjoyed the refreshments at the councilor’s office, I took the liberty of procuring a nice fruit selection from our Asari stores, as well as a bit of smoked maanru and Kaffe.”

Miranda paused in the doorway and extended her arms out to her side. “May I presume? …”

The consort’s eyes twinkled with joy and a quiet, musical laugh escaped as she stepped into Miranda’s inviting embrace. “You most certainly may! You have shared the most intimate of details with me and I think we have gone well beyond the normal introductory relationship of consort-client to something much deeper. For the present, I will be whatever you need me to be, Miranda, but perhaps, in time, we may even become true friends?”

“I’d like that.” Miranda pulled back and cocked her head slightly as she looked at the smile on Sha’ira’s face. “I think I would like that very much.”

“Excellent.” The consort dipped her head graciously. “Though for now, we’ll need to move inside so the door can close and we can get on with your session.” Her face turned sad for an instant as she continued, “There are so many who require aid. The war was … difficult … for many, some of whom will never be the same, so I and my acolytes have several appointments today.” She paused and stared at the human for a moment. “I admire your mental fortitude, Miranda.”

They approached the couches and eased into the comfort of the overstuffed pillows, an inviting tray of goodies sitting on the table before them. Sha’ira smiled slyly. “Now. What is going on with you? You have a spring in your step that was most definitely lacking last time I saw you.”

Miranda blushed and grinned shyly. “I’ve met a man … a Council Spectre … by the name of Kaidan Alenko.” A look of concern flashed across Sha’ira’s face and Miranda immediately felt the need to reassure her. “It’s okay. He’s wonderful and kind … and completely aware of my background. He’s insisting we take it slowly, to ensure we don’t jeopardize my recovery … his words, not mine.”

The Consort felt uncharacteristically protective of Miranda and she couched her words carefully, so as to not insult or offend her human patient. “I know of this man, but have never had the privilege of meeting him in person … and I would very much like to do so. Do you think it would be possible?”

Miranda looked at Sha’ira quizzically. “I … suppose so … but I don’t know how amenable he would be to such a meeting. Plus, he’s due to head off for an assignment at Grissom Academy, and I don’t know how much time he has before his departure.”

“I see.” Sha’ira’s expression turned serious. “Then I must ask this. Did you, at any period during your time spent with him, feel the need to repeat your mantra?”

“Absolutely not,” came the immediate reply as Miranda relaxed and laughed. “But why should I try to explain, when I can simply show you?”

“And you are willing to show me something so private, which is not related to your troubles or your
treatment?” Sha’ira’s voice was so hopeful that Miranda had to laugh again.

“But it is part of my treatment, is it not? To return to what one would consider a normal life?” Miranda smiled softly. “Besides, the meld will be as much for me to determine your motives as for you to see such a visit is unnecessary … to protect me.”

Sha’ira blushed slightly in embarrassment as she dipped her head in acknowledgement. “And so the patient becomes a teacher, as well. I apologize if I have overstepped in my efforts to oversee your recovery, Miranda.”

“Don’t be silly; I appreciate the level of concern you show for my wellbeing. You and Xiùlán are both extremely protective of me … and I have to admit I find it comforting to know you are there.” Smiling, Miranda leaned forward and laid a hand on Sha’ira’s arm. “Now, you said you were short on time. Shall we begin?”

Sha’ira offered little in the way of spoken confirmation, simply letting her eyes go black with a quietly whispered, “Embrace eternity, Miranda.”

Miranda quickly showed Sha’ira the highlights from the last two weeks, finishing with the night spent with Kaidan in platonic camaraderie. Sha’ira began to pull back. {You are doing well! Of course, we won’t really know how well until you are forced to confront your attacker in the courtroom. Then, we will truly know if your treatment has been beneficial.}

{Shi! Wait, please. Xiùlán asked something of me, and I need your assistance to accomplish it.} Sha’ira said nothing, but Miranda got the sense through the meld that the consort was awaiting an explanation of the request, so she continued. {She wants to know if the location of any Cerberus stations are hidden within my memories … either by lack of interest, or by repression for whatever reason. Would you be able to accomplish such a thing? Help me find them … remember them?}

Sha’ira continued her retreat and gently broke the meld, concentrating intently on the human woman before her, during which time both of them remained absolutely silent. When the consort finally spoke, it was with great hesitation. “Miranda. What you ask … It is extremely invasive and very rarely done.” Sha’ira physically shivered as she continued, “The Justicars are trained in the technique to shine light on those with Ardat Yakshi potential … Otherwise, the practice is never used except in very rare cases of severe emotional trauma where the patient has totally withdrawn into themselves for some unknown reason, and is completely beyond the reach of conventional treatment methods.” She drew a deep breath and almost whispered, “It requires me to rummage through your every memory … however cursorily. Compare it to sweeping the cobwebs from the darkest corners of your mind; the brain is a vast trove of forgotten events … some of which, if not most, are best left hidden in the shadows. I must ask … Do you truly comprehend the intimacy of such contact?”

Miranda’s entire body had tensed as Sha’ira explained what was required, but she forced herself to take a deep breath and explain the purpose behind it. “We … need to be melded for me to explain … I honestly dare not say it aloud, but you’ll discover it anyway if you go hunting, so it will be easier if I simply tell you what you’re actually looking for. You can decide then if it is something you are willing to attempt with me.”

Sha’ira reached over and firmly took Miranda’s hands in her own. “It is not a matter of willingness, Miranda Lawson, but of your mental state. We are currently meeting so as to repair damage done to you by others … I will not participate in any activity that could complicate your condition by bringing forth additional unremembered trauma from earlier times. As a therapist, I cannot … and will not … do so.”

“But you’ll at least hear me out?” Miranda caressed the consort’s hands as she continued, “Even
though Xiûlán asked it of me, it is very important to me as well.”

Sha’ira nodded slowly. “We can start and, once you have explained, we will see. I reserve the right to stop this at any time. Is that understood?”

“Of course, Consort.” Miranda looked her directly in the eyes. “This is your specialty, not mine, and I will defer to your judgment on the matter. Your decision will be final; I will not question it.”

“In that case, Miranda … Once again, embrace Eternity.”

Once more, their two minds fell together and Miranda disclosed the virtual presence of Shepard within the Normandy … along with their desire to locate the other cloning research stations established by Cerberus, in an attempt to bring the commander back into the physical realm. Sha’ira gasped at the revelation. {By the Goddess! Shepard … lives?}

{If you can call her present state … living … then, yes. She does.} Able to sense Sha’ira’s amazement and joy at the possibility that Shepard was still among them, Miranda felt more confident that the consort would be willing to make the attempt. She never said the words, but Sha’ira picked up on her thoughts.

{You are correct, Miri. For Shepard’s sake … combined with the strength of your desire to help her … I will attempt to do as you ask.}

A/N: A special thanks to Desert Sunrise for assistance in creating the meld depicted above.
Fair Winds, Following Seas

When we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves. — Viktor E. Frankl

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**MASTER SERGEANT** — In Turian military ranks, this Systems Alliance rank is equivalent to a **Centurion**.
**SU** — Service Uniform

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♦ INSIDE THE REPOSITORY ŽIUK'DURMAH – ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

Traynor looked at her companion. “Feel that, Tali? I think Žiuk'Durmah is coming alive.” She quickly entered another message to the Repository. »Please inform us when you feel full power has been restored. We do not want you leaving this dock until you are completely aware of your surroundings and have communicated with Harbinger.«

Tali looked at Traynor as she reported, “Looks like ninety-four percent of his power is available, Specialist. The eezo core is responding well.”

›Traynor-Specialist. I am running self-diagnostics of my power systems; all functions are approaching one hundred percent of my previously available power.«

»That’s excellent news, Žiuk'Durmah. Does the power source seem any different than the one I had to eject? «

›I am unable to detect any differences, except… hold…«

Tali’s voice had a worried tone as she reported, “Power is climbing past a hundred percent, Samantha.”

“That may be a result of using a core from either an older or newer Reaper. Most likely the core Harbinger brought is slightly larger … contains more eezo. What was a hundred percent for Žiuk'Durmah before may now be a hundred ten, or twenty.” Traynor, as if she were calculating in her head what the safety overhead for a Reaper might be, concluded in a soft voice. “I don’t believe we need to worry about it. Their structures could most likely withstand even more power without any problems.”

Tali checked her readouts again. “It appears Žiuk'Durmah will have a ten percent addition to available power.”

›Traynor-Specialist. I am detecting no further increase in the amount of power available for my use, which is currently 109.8059624 percent of power output capability prior to my core ejection.«

» Keep running diagnostics, Žiuk'Durmah. We just performed a complicated transplant; we really need to be sure every one of your systems that rely on that core for power will be able to correctly utilize it, particularly sub-light and FTL propulsion, maneuvering, and … weapons. «

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♦ SSV HONG KONG II · ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦
After spending most of the previous day with the consort Sha’ira, Miranda’s evening aboard the
*Hong Kong* consisted of a lot of tossing and turning in her berth; she had a difficult time finding a
comfortable position under her blankets and had to revert to sitting on the edge of the mattress,
forearms across her thighs, feet on the cold deck plates as she attempted to use her mantra to calm her
racing, chaotic thoughts.

Sha’ira had warned her that looking for hidden memories in the corners of her mind might prove
upsetting … Miranda heaved a heavy sigh as she thought about what had happened during the final
meld of the day. Miranda had been a right-hand agent of the Illusive Man for a long time … long
enough to be trusted with some secrets of the most obscure things, including the locations of two of
the Cerberus research facilities most involved with the creation—the actual growing—of cloned
human bodies.

Checking the chrono on her omnitool, she decided to go pee before crawling back into her rack. *I’ll
request a private breakfast with Captain Yuán before the start of my shift. I need to tell her what the
consort helped me uncover.* Rising from her berth, she padded silently to the women’s head,
emptied her bladder, then returned to her berth.

Lying on her side, she thought about her dinner with Major Alenko a few evenings ago … seemed
like a dream now. Thinking about Kaidan’s smile, the way it touched the corners of his eyes …
those soulful, whiskey-colored eyes … made her heart flutter and started a yearning warmth in her
core. Kaidan was the kind of man she had *never* known during her years with Cerberus. She
concentrated on remembering his voice, the feel of his body against her bosom as she’d hugged him
after dinner. The happy thoughts lulled her to sleep in minutes, where her dreams seemed to be
about nothing or nobody else.

Xiùlán glanced at Miranda as she poured tea for them both. “Something must really be on your mind
for you to come to me so early, Specialist. I take it yesterday’s session with the consort was
productive?”

“Quite productive, Captain. I think my mind is clearer than it has been in many months, thanks to
you.”

Xiùlán smiled as she took a sip from her mug. “I wasn’t the one hugging the consort and crying my
eyes out.” Xiùlán held up her hand to indicate she was teasing. “You did all the work, Miri—you
and Sha’ira. And I am very glad she was able to help you sort those memories. But, am I correct in
assuming your captivity isn’t why you wanted to talk to me this morning?”

“I asked her to probe my mind a bit deeper. It was something she did not wish to do, until I asked
her to meld with me so I could divulge the secret aboard the *Normandy*.”

“I’ll bet *that* surprised her. She didn’t think you were lying? …”

“I couldn’t lie to her if I wanted, Captain. In here …” she tapped her forehead, “… there are no lies,
no hidden truths.” Miranda took a bite from her short stack as Xiùlán continued to sip her tea. After
chewing and swallowing, she continued. “Once she saw the need, I dropped all my barriers … gave
her free range to look at everything.” Miranda closed her eyes as she massaged her temples between
thumb and fingers of one hand. “I don’t say this with any pride, Captain, but she discovered things I
did while working for Cerberus that … well, I’m not ready to share with you now; I may *never* be
ready to divulge all I’ve done in the distant past. Just trust that the person that committed those
atrocities in the name of humanity no longer exists. The past is simply that, and it’s not subject to
change.”
“There are things I have done as well, Miri,” Xiùlán replied quietly. “We all have a past—some of us, myself included, have done things … or caused things to happen—that we would not wish to become common knowledge.” Xiùlán sipped her tea as she contemplated her friend over the rim of her mug. “So, what new information … that you can share … did Sha’ira help you uncover?”

Miranda looked at her captain for a moment before answering, “Locations, Ma’am. I am now aware of two more locations where Cerberus was performing experiments on human cloning … places not generally known to anyone else.” Miranda finished the food on her plate, took a sip from her mug, then looked directly at Xiùlán. “Both are in the Styx Theta cluster, which the Illusive Man apparently chose because its Mass Relay is not paired with any other—the only way to reach the cluster is through the Horsehead Nebula. Also, the cluster lies extremely close to the ‘Five Kilo parsec Ring’ around the galactic core, making for hazardous travel conditions.”

“Space stations or ground facilities?”

“Stations, similar to Cronos in construction, though smaller by 15 to 20 percent,” came the ready response. “There’s one in each of the two systems in the cluster. Shouldn’t be too difficult to find them.”

Xiùlán nodded slightly. Bringing up a miniature galaxy map with her omnitool, she studied systems between the Serpent Nebula and Styx Theta, before concluding, “We’ll need to ride in a Repository to get there—relay in the Horsehead Nebula is still being repaired. I’ve heard from Specialist Traynor that Žiuk’Durmah’s eezo core is being replaced—may be possible to have it—or him, if I am to believe the reports from Sà mí … take us there.”

Closing her omnitool, she added, “I’ll talk to Admiral Hackett—get his permission to make the trip. We need to retrieve whatever tech is available to get Shepard free of the Normandy’s server.”

♦ FINANCIAL AND DIPLOMATIC SECTOR, PRESIDIUM · CITADEL ♦

Sha’ira had never been so torn as she was after yesterday’s meeting with Miranda Lawson. The human had asked—nearly begged—her to initiate a meld that would violate the implied trust the consort had with every single one of her clients. Miranda accepted the risks from within the meld, after showing Sha’ira proof of Commander Rachaél Shepard’s continued existence as a disembodied spirit in the computer core of the SSV Normandy.

At first, Sha’ira’s faith in the many different manifestations of life had been shaken, but as she explored Miranda’s mind, touching on many, many secrets that had been hidden away through the years, the Consort came to see there were more possibilities for life than she had believed existed.

It was because of this revelation she had instructed Nelyna to clear her morning schedule; she had then left her quarters through her isolated passageway and moved with all haste to the private offices of Councilor Raesia Tevos. As expected, Dalis Shegos greeted her at the outer door and promptly ushered her into Tevos’ inner sanctum, where the councilor was relaxing in one of several upholstered chairs placed around the room.

Tevos stood immediately upon seeing her lifelong friend and confidant. “Sha’ira! Your message told of an urgent matter you needed to discuss with me … what is it, my love? You seem … unsettled.”

Sha’ira embraced Tevos, surprising her with a more intimate hug than expected, as if it had been years rather than mere days since their last meeting. “I don’t know if it is me that is unsettled, Rae, but the news I received yesterday is most unsettling.”
Tevos indicated a small couch where they could both sit comfortably; after offering her some tea, Tevos sat next to her friend and said, “So, what have you learned that has you so nervous, Shi?”

The consort sipped from her cup as she rolled the thoughts around in her mind, searching for the proper way to tell her lover what she’d learned. Choosing her words carefully, she began, “I met with Specialist Lawson yesterday afternoon … for a follow up to our previous meeting.” A sip of tea, then, “She has progressed marvelously. The mental trauma from her captivity has been compartmentalized beautifully … it is really something to witness. I have no doubt in her ability to move on from what happened to her. She’s even had dinner with a man … a Major Alenko … and spent the evening in his apartment afterwards!” Sha’ira’s tone left no doubt in Tevos’ mind that this had been a momentous occasion. “I believe she’s regaining her trust in the innate goodness of people, especially male colleagues with whom she must necessarily interact on a space-faring vessel.”

Sha’ira rose from the sofa to pace restlessly about the room. Tevos knew enough about her friend to simply let her amble about until she was ready to once again sit and talk. When Sha’ira did return to her seat beside her friend, she may as well have dropped a bomb with her next statement. “Rae … during our final meld, Miranda told me …” Whatever Sha’ira had been about to say, she thought better of it, clamping her lips together in an unhappy frown.

Reaching for and taking a hand, Sha’ira surprised Tevos by asking her to join her mind. Raesia opened up to her long-time lover; once joined, her surprise was evident in her greeting. {What is this about, Shi? I have never seen you this agitated.}

{Before I divulge what I know, you must swear to keep this secret, Rae. Even revealing what I have previously learned while now melded with you, I am committing a monstrous breach of client confidentiality. It’s just that … I am unable to bear this knowledge by myself, and don’t know where else to turn! Please swear to me, Raesia … please.}

Tevos could feel Sha’ira’s mental anguish at what she intended, and could think of no secret that would cause such in the normally serene consort. {I will keep whatever you share with me sequestered, and shall never speak of it, as the Goddess is my witness. You may share anything with me in strictest confidence, Shi.}

The consort drew a long, shuddering breath, held it for a moment, then blew it out as she attempted to calm her soul. {Rachaël is alive, Raesia … Rachaël Shepard … is alive and apparently well in the server core of the Normandy!}

Tevos’ eyes opened wide as she placed a hand over her mouth and whispered, “By the Goddess, Shi! How can that be possible?” Returning to her mental voice, she continued, {We know she was on the Citadel, that she initiated the sequence to merge organic with synthetic. No remains were ever found!}

Sha’ira gently squeezed Tevos’ hands, now trembling in reaction to the news with which she’d just been presented. {There is a plan evolving amongst her former crew—Liara T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian are searching for abandoned Cerberus installations in the Horsehead Nebula; the Normandy and Hong Kong will travel there together and attempt to find a body—one cloned for the commander after her death over Alchera}

{They intend to bring her back to life? How can that be possible?}

Sha’ira smiled within the meld as she replied, {The Reaper-Repository Harbinger will facilitate the merging of Shepard’s consciousness with that of a living body, allowing the Commander to again become part of the physical world.}
Tevos pondered what she had learned as Sha’ira gently terminated the meld. Sharing the burden of knowing the truth about Commander Shepard was not what she had expected when Sha’ira had entered her chambers; now that she was a party to that knowledge, she isolated it in her mind, in a place that would certainly be bypassed by a cursory scan, should such ever be forced upon her.

Rising from her chair, she offered a fresh glass of water to her long-time friend. This morning’s joining had been taxing for Sha’ira, but she looked to be more at peace than when she first arrived. She paged Dalis to bring in a fruit tray and a bit of wine; an early lunch would help settle them both.

♦ HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL ♦

As Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau pulled on his SU, he thought about the number of motions his arms and legs had to perform just to get dressed. Unlike before his several bone weave surgeries, he was experiencing no pain as he bent an arm behind his neck to catch a sleeve opening, shove his arm through and pull the shirt onto his torso. No pain! Amazing. He squared away all his fasteners, tucked the shirt into the top of his trousers and sat in a nearby chair to pull on his boots.

Standing again, he checked his appearance in the full-length mirror on the back of the door. Only one thing missing … where in hell did I put my? … Looking around the small room, he finally found it, squashed and stuffed in the crease between seat and backrest of the upholstered visitor’s chair. … there you are! How’d you get stuffed in there? He cautiously tugged on the bill of his old cap; freeing it from the embrace of the cushions, he worked it back into its proper shape before jamming it on his head.

Standing in front of the mirror once more, he studied his reflection, making sure he hadn’t missed anything. His ‘cover’ didn’t look too bad for having spent days stuffed between the cushions of a chair – the gold piping running front-to-back across the top on both sides, framing the large ‘SR2’ patch on the front of the blue cap. It had been a gift from Cerberus when he’d been hired to fly the just-completed frigate in the fight against the Collectors. As there was no indication on the cap of its original affiliation, Joker had kept it after the Normandy had been confiscated from Cerberus and refitted to ‘standard design specs’ by the Alliance. Moving back to the bed, he grabbed his pack and made his way to the door to leave.

As he started down the short passage to the centralized attendant’s station, he saw Edi talking with Dr Chakwas; they fell silent and watched as he slowly walked up to them.

“Good morning, ladies. Am I to presume Edi is here to escort me to my quarters?”

Karin smiled as she replied, “You presume correctly, Flight Lieutenant. She’ll make sure you get to your apartment and are settled in, unless you’d rather return to the Normandy. Captain Cody is filling crew positions and taking on provisions and supplies. I believe he intends to depart the Citadel just as soon as the thirty-day leave period is over.”

Joker kept his facial expression neutral as he asked, “So, you’re clearing me for flight duty, Dr Chakwas?”

“Only if you feel you’re ready, Jeff. Remember, your leave was extended by the number of days you were in hospital. Bill Cody promised you would be the Normandy’s pilot, so … the ship won’t depart the Citadel without you at the helm.”

“Something has come up, Jeff,” Edi said earnestly. “Garrus and Dr T’Soni are on the hunt for the abandoned Cerberus stations involved in bringing Rachael Shepard back from death. One station—Minuteman—is very much alive, with a VI controlled defense protocol. It fired on Iringú-Ebizkur
when she got too close—didn’t score any hits, but the number of Thanix gun emplacements makes any approach by a Reaper problematic. Liara estimated at least eighteen guns … a hit from one or two would be sufficient to breach the hull on Iringū-Eßizkur.”

“And Cody thinks the Normandy would stand a better chance of docking there?” Jeff didn’t bother to hide his doubts. “The Normandy still has Reaper tech installed … a hella lot more than when we left the place originally for our inaugural voyage.”

“Which is why the Hong Kong will accompany the Normandy to the Horsehead Nebula,” Edi replied. “Multiple frigates have always had an edge over a single ship, Jeff. And it’s believed that Miranda Lawson’s expertise as a former Cerberus agent may just give a ground team the edge needed to shut down whatever VI or AI is controlling it.”

“Has the Pax Relay been repaired? It’s going to take a significant amount of time to get there without the relay in that system…” Joker had an uncomfortable feeling he knew how they’d be getting to the nebula without a functioning relay, but waited for confirmation from Edi.

“Harbinger has offered to transport both ships, along with Asharru, the Hong Kong’s guardian destroyer.”

“Dammit! I just knew you were going to say that!” Joker hefted his pack and grimaced at Edi as he started for the exit. “Let’s get back to the ship, Edi. May as well get my ass planted in that leather pilot’s chair before someone higher up the chain decides they need it!”

♦ OUTER REGION, DELTA WARD • CITADEL ♦

Master Sergeant Esilaro stared at the chit he’d just acquired. There appeared to be a name written on the back, oriented parallel to the horizontal lines that comprised a large part of the reverse side. The printed letters looked strange, as if they were part of an alien language. Carefully depositing the chit in a pocket, he stood and walked towards the exit as he thought about the short meeting he’d just concluded with his informant, a batarian named Ubravile Ghad’she.

Assigned to light duty since his release from Huerta Memorial, Esilaro had been digging tirelessly into Blue Suns operations on the Citadel—specifically, the use of heavily armed mechs and a room rigged with high-explosives. The Alliance had the human leader of the local branch of the Suns in custody; many of the problems in this section of Delta Ward had ceased with this one arrest, as Jason Joesiar was being held in solitary confinement.

Esilaro smiled inwardly at this—it was rare for the Alliance to treat their prisoners with anything less than the utmost care for their well-being, both physical and mental. He had even heard Joesiar was being kept incommunicado from his family or an advocate, something that was rarely done even by C-Sec. Little vorcha-spawn must have pulled some really miserable shit to be locked away so thoroughly, thought the turian.

Esilaro was about to get into his C-Sec issued, blue and white aircar when something caught his eye. The vehicle had been moved ever so slightly from where the turian had left it—it was no longer aligned to the colored stripe that designated the parking place for an emergency vehicle. Backing slowly away, he activated his omnitool and sent a ‘CODE-BLACK/ASSISTANCE NEEDED’ message to C-Sec headquarters. After receiving confirmation his message had been received, he began to look around the area with the goal of uncovering anything else out of place.

He had almost finished a wide circle of the area around the aircar when another blue and white emergency unit, overhead lights flashing, appeared in the distance. Esilaro activated his comms unit
and warned the officers to set down at a distance and approach his location on foot; the driver immediately ‘killed’ the emergency lights as he set the car down approximately 150 meters away. Three officers exited the vehicle and started moving towards the Master Sergeant’s position at a steady trot.

Esilaro smiled inwardly as he recognized one of the three by the long rifle he carried … Corporal Vaelyri. If Vaelyri was on the squad, Esilaro knew one of the two others was Sergeant D’thula. Both had been part of the team responsible for taking out the nearby Blue Suns operation —InNetCo—that had nearly been the death of him. Fortunately, C-Sec Commander Bailey had personally seen to his quick evacuation from the bombed warehouse and a proper course of treatment at Huerta Memorial.

The Master Sergeant nodded to D’thula and his companion, a private he did not know. The pair began walking to conduct a wide sweep of the area around Esilaro’s parked aircar.

Flaring his mandibles as the sniper walked up to him, he said, “Good to see you again, Vaelyri.”

“You as well, Sergeant.” Nodding towards Esilaro’s aircar, he smirked, “I’ve been told you have a new-found fear of enclosed spaces … that include speeders?”

Esilaro glared at him good naturedly for a moment before answering, “When it's obviously been tampered with? Then yes, it includes speeders.” Esilaro pointed at the back end of the car as he continued, "It would be fine if it was in the same place I left it … but the rear’s been shifted slightly, and I don’t think it’s sitting flat on the pavement any longer. Didn’t seem prudent to raise the hatch and try sitting inside – there’s enough scar tissue on my hide to last me the rest of my life … which I would like to extend for as long as possible.”

“Think we need a bomb squad?” Vaelyri undocked his customized M-97, pointed it at the aircar and utilized the scope to minutely inspect the lower edge at the rear. “Hmm … definitely something under the rear. I can nail it from here … want to take a chance, see if it explodes?”

Esilaro thought for a few moments before growling out, “No … we’ll wait for the disarmament crew. I’d hate to destroy a perfectly good vehicle on a hunch. If it does have a bomb under it, perhaps we can figure out who placed it and for what purpose … you know, other than murdering me.”

“Probably meant to send a message to Commander Bailey to back off on this line of investigation,” observed Vaelyri. Acting on a hunch, Vaelyri utilized his rifle scope to inspect the obvious places around the street that could shelter someone intent on detonating an explosive device.

Realizing what Vaelyri was doing, Esilaro waited a few moments before quietly asking, “Anything?”

Without taking his eye from the scope, the corporal answered, “Nothing … no open windows or doors, and the alleys appear clean.” Vaelyri collapsed and docked his rifle as he continued, “I expect the gift left for you has a pressure switch, currently held down by the weight of the speeder. Entering the vehicle would present no problem … powering up and ascending would initiate the detonation. Placing that device at the rear would add considerably to the yield; the explosion would breach the engine compartment and the eezo containment field at a time when you’d be attempting to climb and accelerate away.”

“And the bad guy doesn’t have to hang around to be sure of success — the thing is triggered as soon as the speeder comes off the pressure switch,” Esilaro observed.
“Clean kill.” Vaelyri began walking towards the aircar to greet the just arriving disarmament crew. “I’ll fill them in on what we suspect we’re dealing with. A small kinetic field around that thing should allow your aircar to leave in one piece.”

“Sounds good, except I think I’ll fly it off under remote control … safer for me.”

After Vaelyri filled the disarmament team in on what he and Esilaro suspected about the device under his speeder, two team-members set up the field generator while the Master Sergeant pulled up the remote flight program on his omnitool. At a word from Esilaro, the generator’s activation produced a blue-tinged transparent field around the device under the X3M-p. Esilaro performed a verbal countdown from five; reaching ‘one’, he engaged the exterior kinetic barriers simultaneously with his startup of the ME field and engines. The aircar jumped straight up to hover five to six meters above the pavement.

The device within the containment field exploded a split-second after the weight of the X3M-p lifted from the pressure switch, the field instantly expanding like a balloon to maintain control over the tremendous amount of force generated.

As the Master Sergeant carefully brought the aircar back to the roadway, Vaelyri chuckled as he pointed out the obvious: “That was a seriously high-yield bomb, Sarge … You must have really pissed off someone with a lot of extra creds to spend.”

Esilaro flared his mandibles slightly as he growled out a response. “Means I’m on the correct path. Gather up the bits and pieces of that device while I return to HQ … we can analyze the fragments while I run a search on a name I received just before I called you.”

“Meet you there shortly …”

♦ INSIDE THE REPOSITORY ŽIUK’DURMAH · ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

Samantha Traynor was so intent on monitoring the core start and the ancillary operations that kept a Nazara-class Repository functioning correctly, that she actually had to turn towards Tali and ask her to repeat her question.

“I asked you if you could feel the difference in the decking beneath our feet. I am unable to confirm what has happened, but I believe we are no longer docked at the Citadel.”

Traynor’s jaw dropped at this. “What the ‘ell? There’s been no power spikes in the core, at least not what I’d expect a Repository this size would need to generate for movement.”

Directing attention to her omnitool, she quickly generated and sent a text message: »Žiuk’Durmah! Have you left the docks? If so, please explain why you felt it necessary to do so without informing myself or Tali’Zorah.«

Traynor had to wait for more than the several seconds she expected the Construct to reply; when the reply did come, it was not at all what she anticipated. »Traynor-Specialist. Further diagnostics of my power systems are still required; my available power cannot be fully ascertained during a static load test dockside. I have left the Citadel for what human engineers refer to as a ‘shake-down’ cruise. My first destination is Sol.«

Traynor’s heart was in her throat as she attempted to input new instructions … Thinking It’s nothing but a computer … a giant fuckin’ computer! Gotta make it see reason … she sent a message: »Žiuk’Durmah! I need you to stand down! Do not enter the relay! Your systems need testing in
In the meantime, Tali had been furiously entering instructions at her terminal; she was finally rewarded with the massive wall in front of them flickering into life to become a virtual viewport, enabling the pair to see where they were going, as well as where they had been. The Citadel was nearly invisible in the distant cloud of gas and dust.

As they watched the relay grow larger in their virtual view, it became obvious Žiuk'Durmah was slowing his forward velocity, but not by enough to avoid entering the approach path as the relay connected with Charon. The Widow Relay brightened as the rings rotational velocity increased – a space-time corridor was being opened, and the decelerating Repository was not slowing rapidly enough to keep from being captured and sent through.

Traynor had enough presence of mind to shout, “Hang on, Tali! This’ll be a rough ride!”

As Žiuk'Durmah’s structure was enveloped in shifting waves of dark energy, his directional stability faltered. The relay sent the Repository into the space-time corridor as Žiuk'Durmah began spinning slowly about his axis and tumbling end-over-end. Tali and Sammy both hung on for dear life as the gyrations threatened to override the motion dampeners at every change in direction. The pair stared at the monitor in horror as the combination of out-of-control motions hurled Žiuk'Durmah out of the slender aperture the relay had opened to the Charon relay and into deep space.

As the Repository stabilized his attitude and came to a complete halt, he spoke aloud for the first time since being repowered. **Traynor-Specialist.** The voice reverberated in the space around them, seemingly coming from nowhere and everywhere.

Sammy looked at Tali for a moment before keying on the internal comms system and answering verbally, “Žiuk'Durmah! What the hell just happened? We just got dropped in the middle of interstellar space. Tali?”

Tali had been running positional data through her omnitool, and had some unwelcome news. “It appears we are approximately a hundred light years from the Citadel. We’re about 45 light years from the relay in the Annos Basin, and about … 145 light years from the Charon Relay in the human’s local cluster.”

**I am sorry, Traynor-Specialist. I am running diagnostics on my navigational and propulsion systems. I have no explanation for what has occurred.**

“Is there some damage to your systems as a result of the Prothean’s sabotage? … something we failed to discover?” Traynor was thinking furiously, trying to determine a way for her and Tali to get out of this predicament alive.

**Standby…** After a 90-second delay, Žiuk'Durmah responded, **There is no physical damage to my propulsion or navigational systems. I am unable to check all of the code that is responsible for those systems—perhaps the last Prothean inserted a final insult before he died? I have… there was a long pause, then, … no other explanation. I simply desired to test my restored systems.**

“That’s really nice, Žiuk'Durmah, but you’re little stunt has placed our lives at risk. You do realize there are no provisions in here—there’s nothing to eat, nothing to drink. At least when we were trapped inside Harbinger we had the shuttle. There were field rations, enough to keep us alive for the trip back.”

Tali wanted to know, “Žiuk'Durmah … how fast can you get us to the Annos Basin?
I have not determined my new maximum velocity. Should I set a course for Pranas?

Traynor shrugged her shoulders. “It’s either there or Aralakh—about the same distance. Honestly, I’d prefer talking to the salarians … no guarantee we’d be able to speak with Urdnot Wrex on Aralakh.”

The display monitor winked out for several seconds; when it came back on, an information window had been set in the lower right corner, displaying distance traveled, distance to destination and current speed. I have added speed and distance information to the display panel. Observe…

The speed began incrementing as the star field changed to show Žiuk'Durmah’s course correction. In less than ten seconds he had jumped to FTL, and the numbers showing his velocity quickly reached into, what was for Traynor, the realm of the unbelievable. Running the numbers on her omnitool, she looked to Tali for confirmation.

“Harbinger’s top speed is approximately 4.27 billion Km a second … 14,245.4 times light speed. A standard Repository like this one should top out at 10,958 times light speed—Žiuk'Durmah is currently running at…” she paused to recheck her numbers before continuing with, “… 4.299 billion Km a second.” Stating the obvious, she added, “4.3 billion Km! Hell, Žiuk'Durmah now has a faster sustained speed than even Harbinger.”

Tali nodded, then added, “If he can sustain this speed, we’re about twenty-seven, maybe twenty-eight hours from Pranas.”

“Guess we need to find a chair, or a bunk. I don’t feel like standing around that long.” Traynor placed her back against the rear bulkhead, folded her legs and slid down until she was sitting on the metal deck. “He said he wanted to conduct a test at full-power … something he was unable to do while docked. I’d say this qualifies …”

“Think anyone will notice our absence, Specialist?”

“Not that many people out at that end of the dreadnaught mooring area … Until we report in, I seriously doubt anyone will know Žiuk'Durmah is gone, much less you … or me.”

Traynor-Specialist, I have established a connection with Harbinger. He will inform Cody-Captain and Yuán-Captain of my current situation. On a different topic, there are several containers of water sitting on the deck in the outer compartment. Unfortunately, I do not have enough stored raw material to manufacture food in any great quantity. I can provide each of you with the equivalent of several field rations.

Tali left to retrieve their water as Traynor responded, “Field Rats? Those will do nicely, Žiuk'Durmah. Please be sure to inform us which are for Tali and which are for me.”

As you wish, Traynor-Specialist.
A New Friend For Zaeed

Chapter by Old Gamer

If this was a flirtation – and it felt like a flirtation – it was like no other flirtation in Katya’s experience: with a man old enough to be her grandfather? – Joyce Carol Oates, A Fair Maiden

♦ ABOARD IRINGÙ-ÊBIZKUR, IN TRANSIT FOR LAZARUS RESEARCH STATION ♦

Iringù-ÊBizkur slowed her velocity to sub-light speed as she entered the Strenuus System in the Horsehead Nebula. She was moving towards the last known coordinates of the Lazarus Research Station as transmitted to her from Harbinger himself. He had stated the location was in dark space, so she changed course to circle the outer edge of the system, reasoning that it would be better to approach the abandoned station from within the system; she really didn’t want to be surprised by Thanix weaponry again.

She registered a return to her sensor sweeps after only a few minutes. Slowing her velocity yet again, she made a double course correction – turning towards the location and turning into a positive angle to bring her above the planetary plane. Continuing to sweep the area as she came closer, the return ‘ping’ became two, then three large reflections, indicating that Harbinger’s information about the station was in error, at least concerning the station’s integrity. She decided to speak with Doctor T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian.

›Dr T’Soni. Garrus Vakarian. I am receiving multiple echos in response to my sensor sweep for Lazarus Station. It would appear an attempt to destroy the station was made, resulting in several large pieces orbiting around each other.‹

Garrus had been monitoring the approach and acknowledged the construct’s analysis. “How far are you from the major sections, Iringù-Eßizkur?”

›Just approaching sixty-eight million kilometers, Garrus Vakarian.‹

“Approach cautiously, Iringù-Eßizkur. Any one of those sections could be armed and controlled by an AI, similarly to Minuteman Station.”

›Understood, Garrus Vakarian.‹

Garrus stepped around the forward bulkhead to Liara’s station, immediately aft of the forward viewing area. “Liara… we’re approaching Lazarus Station. Iringù-Eßizkur has determined the station is in several pieces, which would seem to confirm reports that Cerberus attempted to destroy it after Miranda escaped with Shepard and Jacob Taylor.”

The asari entered several commands into her terminal, resulting in a graphic of its appearance prior to Wilson instigating a takeover by the mechs, alongside a graphical representation of Iringù-Eßizkur’s scan showing the broken sections currently orbiting each other. Liara applied a yellow circle to the section equipped with an airlock.

“This is the section we’ll need to board, Garrus. Once we’re inside, we can send video to Iringù-Eßizkur; in turn, she can send the information to Yuán Xiülán aboard the Hong Kong … Miranda should then be able to guide us to the areas set aside for cloning research. It may even be possible to
retrieve any clones still in cold storage.”

“Hhhmm … I won’t hold my breath on that possibility, Liara. After this many years, I don’t expect there is anything or anybody left alive in that place … Well, apart from a few mechs, anyway.”

Liara directed her attention to their Repository. Speaking towards the intercom, she said, “You heard all of that, Iringù-ÉBizkur?”

›Affirmative, T’Soni Doctor. Distance to station is currently twenty-nine million kilometers‹

♦ SSV NORMANDY · DECK THREE, CREW QUARTERS ♦

Zaeed Massani had been staying busy, using a terminal in the crew quarters to search for any mention of the whereabouts of Vido Santiago or Solem Dal’Serah. After nearly dying in the explosion of the Eldfell-Ashland refinery on Zorya in 2185, Vido had gone to ground; he had been seen infrequently in the months since the end of the Reaper war, most recently on Omega.

A wave of Blue Suns infiltrations within C-Sec on the Citadel had led the Alliance to find Zaeed in London, with the single-minded goal of eliminating the Blue Suns from the entire galaxy. Massani didn’t think it would be an easy task, particularly since Dal’Serah had remained nominally in charge of their day-to-day operations—Santiago was most likely still managing the Suns from the shadows, something Massani knew was made easier by the large number of Blue Suns members on Omega.

That the majority of their membership was made up of batarians made little difference to Santiago; he had advocated for batarians within the group from the start. The scars on Zaeed’s face and an artificial right eye had been his reward for opposing his ‘partner’, who had fully expected Zaeed to die; instead, Vido Santiago had turned Zaeed into a mortal enemy for life … one that would stop at nothing to see him dead and the Suns eradicated.

Massani sighed as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. Whenever he spent any amount of time searching the extranet for the slippery bastard he usually got a headache—today was no different. He closed his connection and logged off the terminal before standing and stretching towards the overhead; dropping his arms, he turned to leave and nearly ran into Sandra Patton, who grabbed both his forearms to halt his progress.

“Massani … haven’t seen you in a while. Why are you holed up in here?” She dropped her hands and backed up half-a-step to give him a bit of space.

“Been lookin’ fer someone,” replied the grizzled old merc. “Ain’t located ’im yet, but I think I’m ge’in’ closer.”

Patton studied Zaeed for a moment before asking, “Want to grab some lunch? We can go ashore, have a meal at one of the sandwich shops close by.”

Massani was surprised. “You sure, Master Guns? Didn’t think yew’d wan’ter be seen wiv da likes ov me.”

Patton chuckled. “Zaeed, there’re probably a great many people still alive in the ’verse that’d be happy to see you dead, but I’m not one of them. I’d like to get to know you better … hear about some of your adventures. I know you’re on the ship to assist Captain Cody in hunting down and killin’ Vido Santiago and eradicating the Blue Suns.” The young woman, easily of an age to be the old merc’s daughter, smiled as he looked at her questioningly. “A real bit of irony there, don’t you think? I mean, you’re the co-founder of the Suns and the Alliance is going to pay you to help take
them down.” Patton continued to smile as she half-turned towards the exit; inclining her head towards the door, she asked, “So, you coming? It’ll be my treat … payback for breakfast in London …”

Zaeed quickly regained his composure. He didn’t know why this woman was interested in him or his history, but she seemed sincere, and it had been a long time since any woman had expressed an interest in him … or anything he had to say. “Come on then. We can catch an air taxi ride ter da restauran’ district … been lookin’ fer an excuse ter try some French cuisine.”

“I was hoping for something a bit more simple,” she responded with a giggle. “I don’t need to eat at some fancy place, Zaeed.” As Patton led the way out of the Crew Quarters, Zaeed tried with little success to avoid watching her ass. It had been a long time since he had bedded a woman … of any age. While he was sure she was sending him signals, he sincerely hoped it hadn’t been so long that he’d forgotten how to read them. Patton was special, something he’d realized the instant he’d discovered her looking for him back on Earth.

♦ ZAEHIN’S SIDEWAYS CAFÉ & GRILLE · CITADEL ♦

“Wonder why dis ‘Zaehin’ calls dis place a ‘sideways’ café?” Zaeed, after leading Sandra Patton to a table that offered a good view of the main entrance, as well as the kitchen and bar area, looked around the interior with a great deal of interest.

“Maybe because it’s so narrow in here … A krogan would have to walk sideways to reach this table,” she smirked, as a human female brought them a pair of menus.

The waitress smiled as she asked, “Would either of you care for a drink while you’re deciding?”

Patton looked to Zaeed before answering for herself, “Just a glass of water, please.”

Zaeed fixed the waitress with a glare from his left eye and simply answered, “I’ll ‘ave a cold pin’ ov your finest stout, darlin’ … whatever you ’ave on tap.” At her questioning look, he added, “… that’s a tall glass ov ale, then, okay?”

A look of understanding replaced the puzzlement from before, and she left to get their drinks.

“Why the hell do you do that, Massani?” Addressing his questioning look, she continued, “You can speak proper Galactic when you wish … I’ve heard you do it.”

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, sweetie.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” came Patton’s retort. “You spoke as if you were an officer in the military when you placed the call for a pickup by the Stalingrad.”

Massani’s sly smile, faint though it was, appeared to confirm Patton’s accusation that he could speak properly when he wished. As the waitress returned with their drinks, he looked up at her and said, “Thanks, darlin’.”

As Massani picked up the heavy glass filled with frothy, ice-cold amber liquid and tossed down a third of its contents, she asked, “Have you decided what you’d like for lunch?”

Interestingly enough for both of them, the menu featured a number of human-centric selections; Patton ordered a Reuben with a small dish of potato salad, and Zaeed asked for beer-battered fish and chips, thinking as he did so that he couldn’t go far wrong there.
“So, tell me the story about that scar and your eye, Zaeed,” Patton said as they waited for their food. “I can’t imagine the amount of pain you had to endure … scuttlebutt on the ship is you pissed off the wrong woman. Any truth, or just a rumor?”

Massani had nearly finished his glass of ale … he looked at her over the rim of the glass for a moment before polishing it off, setting the glass down and leaning forward a bit. “It’s da reason I’m along fer da ride, Master Guns,” he said in a sad, reflective voice.

They were interrupted by the arrival of their lunch selections, accompanied by Rabin Zaehin, the salarian owner of the café. “Good afternoon … pleasure to have you here. Any questions about your food?”

“I’m sure yew didn’t ship fresh fish an’ potatoes from Earth,” Zaeed said, “so where is dis from?”

“Fish is native to Sur’Kesh, similar in many ways to the Cod or Halibut of Earth. Your ‘chips’ … as well as the lady’s potato salad … made from sliced terpomo, plant quite similar to the tuberous potatoes cultivated on Earth.”

Patton studied the salarian with a great deal of interest. “My sandwich? The meat looks and smells like pastrami. The sauerkraut? Not so sure if that’s genuine.”

Zaehin smiled as he blinked his eyes. “Meat is an import from Eden Prime; the cabbage for the sauerkraut grown, processed there as well.”

Sandra smiled at the salarian as she replied, “Thank you for the information. I’ll try to return for lunch again … sometime soon.”

Zaeed held up his empty glass. “Suppose I could have another?”

Zaehin nodded to the waitress to bring another ale as he continued to smile; thanking them for their patronage, he turned and left to check on other guests.

“Friendly bloke, that,” Zaeed remarked. The waitress set another foaming mug of ale on the table as Zaeed turned his attention to Patton. With a sigh, he asked, “You really wan’ter know about da bastard I’m sworn ter kill?”

With a nod from Patton, Zaeed spent the next half-hour telling the gunnery sergeant about the formation and subsequent betrayal of a partnership—the attempt on his life—the long road over which he had had to crawl, then walk, to re-learn how to do everything most men took for granted—his survival as a free-lancer—becoming a bounty-hunter. “I kept ’earing from people ‘ow I’d ended up bein’ a washed-up ‘as-been what no one would even ’ire ta scrape vermin shit out of a trash block.’ I started takin’ advertised jobs as a’ independen’ contractor after pullin’ myself together.” Sandra looked at Zaeed with new understanding as they ate and drank. For his part, Zaeed was able to tell the story without becoming angry all over again.

Sandaa felt real empathy for the man … for what he’d endured … and for the seeming betrayal by Commander Shepard. When she mentioned this, Zaeed waved a hand dismissively. “I can’t blame Shepard fer da bastard givin’ us da slip. Hell, Vito used da innocen’ workers in what bloody refinery ter gain time, an’ Shepard … well, she did what she ’ad ter do ter turn da situaushun aroun’. Vido’s escape weren’t Shepard’s fault. I should ’ave ’elped ’er find a differen’ path.”

Sandra slowly reached a hand across the table. “Zaeed, I’m so sorry …” Taking one of Massani’s hands, she observed, “… seems your life has been an uphill slog ever since Vido’s attempt on your life. Ever think of quitting … throwing in the towel?”
“Wouldn’t know what ter do wiv myself, now would I? Bein’ a merc … a boun’y ’un’er? Only life I’ve ever known.” Even though the warmth from Sandra’s hand felt good, Zaeed wasn’t comfortable with the feelings that came alive with her simple touch. Turning his hand under hers, he gently wrapped fingers gnarled from too many hard years and too many fist fights around the back of her hand, gave a little squeeze of acknowledgement and let go. “So, what ’ave yew been doin’ since arrivin’ on da Normandy?”

Patton’s half-smile slowly vanished as she sat back in her chair, contemplating Zaeed’s obvious rejection of her friendly approach. *What is that? Too much difference in age? I know I’m young enough to be his daughter … is that it? Tread carefully, Sandee. You do not want to alienate this man … just need to dial back the speed of your approach.*

All of this ran through her mind as she told Zaeed about some of the modifications and improvements that had been made to the ship’s external weaponry. “The Thanix cannon has been upgraded, as has the GARDIAN system—greater range, more power …”

“She sounds impressive,” Massani said. Finishing his ale, he asked, “Cap’n Cody expectin’ ter run into da kind ov armed resistance that’d require so much fire power?”

“Wasn’t his call,” Patton replied. “He signed off on the requisitions, but more as a formality than anything.” She knitted her eyebrows together as she added, “I’m the Weapons Systems Division Chief on board, Zaeed … doing what I was hired to do … keeping ship and crew safe from attack. Ship’s no damned good if it can’t attack offensively. Same with ground teams … not going to have anyone wondering if their weapons are going to operate correctly. I’ve also added to the number of small arms we carry on board—all the latest shotguns and assault rifles, along with a few specialty weapons.” Looking up at his face, Patton saw a bit of a smile tickling the corners of his mouth. “What?”

“Nothing, Master Guns. It’s jus’ … well, I ’eard you brought an antique sniper rifle on board when yew transferred. Any truf ter that?”

“Should I call you an antique, just because you’re a bit … mature, for a merc?” She chuckled at the thought. “I wouldn’t call my rifle an antique—it’s a Jörmangund Technology Helix model 10, with a custom scope, custom stock, recoil damper and a specially modified block shaver, and it can be fitted with a silencer. Most rifles overheat after two shots … this one can fire three in a row and bullseye a target with each shot. Cool down takes a third less time than standard, and there’s no worry about finding a thermal clip in the field.”

Massani tried to not let her see how impressed he was … there weren’t many Marines in the Navy that recognized a quality rifle from before the Reaper War. “You must be comfortable wiv dat gun … we should go out ter da range before da ship deploys … shoot up some targets at long range. It’d be fun.”

Patton stood up to leave. “You want me to take you to the Alliance rifle range? I thought you were a close-in assassin. Have you ever *used* a sniper rifle?”

Massani chuckled as he followed her—it was the first time Sandra had heard him express any delight at all. “Darlin’, I been killin’ wiv long guns since befawer yew was a lustful gleam in yer daddy’s eye. Don’t *ever* fnk ol’ Zaeed Massani can’t pop someone’s ’ead from a thousand meters ’cause ’e’s old an’ missin’ an’ eye.”

Sandra smiled as she paid for their lunch, until a thought … something about the way Zaeed had answered her … made her stop. Turning towards him as he waited for her to go through the open door ahead of him, she said, “Wait a minute … are you … asking me out on a date, Zaeed?”
“Didn’t fink askin’ a Marine—even if she is as easy on da eyes as yew are—ter a shootin’ range could be called ‘askin’ er on a date’, but whatever blows your ’air back, swee’heart.” Zaeed looked rather pleased with himself as he waited to see if she was going to get mad or just ignore him. Her response was totally unexpected, leaving him in shock.

“I’d be happy to take you to the rifle range, Massani.” Grabbing his arm, she reached up and kissed him on the cheek; still holding onto his arm, she added in a slightly husky tone, “You’re going to need someone to watch your back when you get close to Santiago. I’d like that someone to be me, Zaeed.”

Patton continued to hold onto Massani’s upper arm, pressed up close to him as they walked back to the Normandy. Bloody fuckin’ ’ell! What would me ol’ mates make ov me right now? I’m not even ‘ryin’!

Normally, Zaeed would have shrugged away from her, breaking the contact, but …

dammit, I mus’ really be ge’in’ old! Son ova bitch! … can’t remember da last time a bird wan’ed me for … what? … a companion? … a friend? Whatever she’s after, I can’t say it don’t feel nice ta ‘ave ‘er close …

As he continued walking, he shook his arm loose, earning a concerned look from slate-grey eyes until he brought the arm around behind her, grabbed her side just above her hipbone and pulled her in even closer; her response was to sigh in satisfaction as she slid an arm around his back and leaned her head against his shoulder in order to reinforce their closeness.

Dammit Sandee! Watch your ass with this one. There’s a lot of pain under that steely exterior. Don’t let him hurt you like … no! He won’t do that. I won’t let him. Just have to be cautious …

The pair slowly made their way back to the Alliance docks, ignoring the sidelong looks and outright stares of the people passing by. Patton thought to herself, ‘Either Zaeed looks like a cradle robber, or some kind of old perv for having an arm around a young woman. As if it’s anyone’s business. I don’t give a damn what they think … I like him, and I intend to make sure he knows it.’

As they neared the Normandy’s mooring, Zaeed let go of Sandra’s waist. Bringing his arm around, he slid his hand down the arm she had around his back, gently forcing her to let go as well. Grabbing her hand, he smirked, “Ough’ter show a bi’ of propriety fer our shipmates, don’cha think?” He had a difficult time masking his surprise at her next statement.

“I like you, Zaeed. In spite of all your rough edges, there’s something about you that’s simply … compelling. I’m not going to worry about what others think … none of their fuckin’ business now, is it?” She planted a quick kiss on his cheek, freed her hand and turned to slowly walk up the loading ramp to the hanger deck.

Massani was now well and truly intrigued. This young woman was a real ‘looker’, and she was interested in him? Damn! Universe moves in mysterious ways, don’t it?

♦ INSIDE THE REPOSITORY ŽIUK’DURMAH · ENTERING ANNOs BASIN ♦

›Traynor-Specialist. Tali’Zorah-Admiral. Standby for return to sub-light velocity in five minutes.‹

Samantha Traynor paused her search for inconsistent code buried in the autonomous programming controlling Žiuk’Durmah’s propulsion and navigational systems; she had been able to isolate three instances of recently added instructional lines, all dealing with navigation through the relays.

Tali had traveled down to the construct’s engineering areas. As a propulsion engineer herself, she felt she was best suited to inspect the physical condition of the newly installed eezo core; she could not look at it directly while it was in operation, but could inspect it through the many remote sensors
connected to the containment structure.

“I’ll be up there in twenty minutes, Specialist,” came the cheery voice in her comms.

Samantha’s reply expressed some concern. “Tali, heed any warnings you hear from Žiuk’Durmah. Dropping from FTL may cause disturbances in the physical shell of this thing—from a simple vibration to a massive jolt. Make sure you have something solid to hold onto when the time gets close.”

“You got it, Samantha.”

Traynor touched several controls on the interface controlling their forward viewscreen, resulting in a digital countdown to normal space appearing in the lower left corner of the screen. As the count reached 00:02:10, Žiuk’Durmah gave a verbal confirmation of the time remaining. Traynor reset the external view sensor to a wider angle – she could now see Žiuk’Durmah’s ‘legs’ out ahead of his main body, all wreathed in constantly shifting violet to blue-white sheets of electrically charged waves discharging into the frigid cold of the interstellar vacuum through which they traveled.

She checked the digital readouts in the lower right corner of the screen—distance traveled, distance to destination and current speed—the current speed was the interesting number, having dropped from 4.299 billion kilometers a second to just over 499.5 thousand Km a second. Žiuk’Durmah was decelerating rapidly as he drew nearer to Annos Basin and the relay in the Pranas star system.

“Tali, make sure you have a solid deck under your feet and grab a handhold,” Traynor warned over the comms as Žiuk’Durmah announced less than a minute to sub-FTL. “Transitioning to sub-FTL speed in less than a minute.”

“No need to worry, Specialist … I’m in a good place,” came the reply.

It was mere seconds until Žiuk’Durmah’s velocity dropped below light speed; the sudden appearance of a Sovereign-class Reaper outside of a relay transit corridor shocked the captains and crews of several STG corvettes engaged in maneuvers at the relay and around their homeworld of Sur’Kesh.

As the ships scattered to get out of the way of Žiuk’Durmah, one unfortunate captain, believing he had enough time and speed to get clear, chose to cross in front of the Repository’s direction of travel. Žiuk’Durmah immediately rolled and dived to go ‘under’ the small vessel; realizing he would still pass close enough for the effects of the massive kinetic barrier protecting his structure to violently shove the corvette out of the way, the Repository instantly terminated the field.

The corvette passed within thirty meters of the enormous construct’s main body. While physical contact had been avoided, Žiuk’Durmah was still electrically charged from his passage through deep space; a tendril of blue-white lightning quickly formed at the tips of his legs, surrounding them and traveling back along his structure, racing in a ragged line rearward. With no place left to go, the static wave discharged violently into space as it coalesced at the tip of his ‘tail’. Unfortunately, the salarian vessel was the closest object to the Repository and caught the main discharge as Žiuk’Durmah passed.

The salarian vessels immediately converged on the now immobilized victim of an impressive static discharge—sounding as if he expected no answer, the captain of one vessel nevertheless attempted to contact the Repository. Žiuk’Durmah responded to the hail, sending the exchange to speakers inside his structure. ›This one apologizes for exiting FTL so close to your vessels.‹

The salarian captain responded in a neutral tone: “The ship you damaged … it had been commandeered by pirates. We were attempting to force them to surrender before they could reach
the relay. You have performed a great favor for the salarian union. By what name should we call you?"

“This one is Žiuk’Durmah. Disabling that vessel was an accident. Our hope is there were no casualties as a result of the energy discharge.”

Thankfully, Žiuk’Durmah continued to slowly move towards the relay. The salarian captain responded with, “The pirates committed several serious assaults during the theft of the vessel … some of their victims have since died. We will send a boarding party aboard to determine their status and the status of the vessel. Your assistance, even if accidental, is appreciated. In all likelihood, Dalatrass Tolann will be contacting the council concerning this matter.”

Žiuk’Durmah waited several seconds before responding, “If our presence is no longer required, we will continue on our journey.”

Traynor watched in fascination as the corvettes converged on the vessel disabled by Žiuk’Durmah, as she wondered what would become of the survivors. A bright flash, followed by panicked distress calls, answered her question. “Shit! Tali! Get up here, now! Žiuk’Durmah, come about, head back towards those ships.”

“As you wish, Traynor-Specialist.”

“Looks as if the pirates sprang a surprise on the boarding party,” Tali commented from behind Traynor.

Turning around, Sam replied, “Tali! I didn’t hear you enter.” Nodding as she returned her attention to the view screen, she continued, “I can’t imagine them blindly boarding a ship manned by pirates. They must have believed everyone was either incapacitated or dead.” Pausing to collect her thoughts, she spoke to the Repository. “Žiuk’Durmah, your ability to ferry vessels may be needed; please bring up the temperature and atmosphere in your hanger bay. Contact the salarian captain you spoke with previously.”

Žiuk’Durmah responded immediately, again sending his own voice and the answering communications from the salarians to Traynor’s and Tali’s chamber. “This is the Repository Žiuk’Durmah. There were distress calls. How may this one be of assistance?”


Žiuk’Durmah responded, “Possible for other ships to assist?”

The same voice replied, “No time! Hull fail … ure imminent.”

Žiuk’Durmah began opening his arms to allow access to his hanger entry. “Have your pilot guide your vessel into my structure. There is atmosphere inside. I can rescue your crew.” As he spoke, the massive construct moved towards the stricken vessel.

“Into a Reaper?”

“I am the Repository that brought the Normandy back from the far rim. You must trust me. You have no other choice. Please, enter my structure.”

There was no answer from the salarian vessel, however, it did begin moving into the embrace of the
Repository’s arms.

Traynor had watched and listened with growing concern. “Žiuk’Durmah! Give me a vid connection with the salarian.”

As you wish, Traynor-Specialist.

The view on her monitor changed—Traynor was now looking at the salarian pilot, who looked as if he was going to leap from his seat and run screaming out the damaged airlock. “This is Chief Warrant Officer Samantha Traynor, Systems Alliance Navy. Please dock your vessel with all possible haste … the docking apparatus should not appear much different than anything you’ve seen on the Citadel.”

“A … human … female? And a … quarian?”

“That is correct. Check your environmental sensors. There should be adequate atmo and heat outside your vessel for you to open your airlocks … perhaps clear some of the smoke from your ship.”

Traynor watched and waited as the ship approached the docking apparatus that had been used by the Normandy. As the damaged ship was now completely within Žiuk’Durmah’s structure, she addressed the construct: “Žiuk’Durmah. Set a new destination … we need to get these people to Sur’Kesh. Tell the other ships to follow. They may need to send a shuttle or two over to evacuate the injured crew. Their ship should be capable of limited atmospheric flight once we reach their homeworld.”

As you wish, Traynor-Specialist.

♦ SUSSKIND STATION, RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM · VALHALLAN THRESHOLD ♦

Susskind Station had originally been constructed as a small scientific outpost with living modules for twenty to twenty-four people. It’s placement in the Raheel-Leyya System had been chosen for the relay’s proximity to the binary blue giant, which was the subject of intense study by leading astrophysicists of several races. The station’s design was unique in the known galaxy, having been purposely engineered as a modular facility—it could easily be expanded, and had been, to a point where it now provided housing for over 2000 people, with docking for over fifty starships of various sizes.

The station’s rapid expansion came with a cost: a warren of hidden passages and compartments, along with a number of small businesses involved in less-than-legal activities had rapidly sprung up all over the outer fringes of the facility. A small, non-descript bar-and-grill several meters down a passageway from one such business, Blue Suns Cartage & Distribution, was a regular late night/early morning hangout for Vido Santiago, co-founder and current ‘Co-Executive Officer’ of the Blue Suns.

On this evening Vido was meeting with Solem Dal’Serah, the batarian ‘Head of Operations’ of the Blue Suns. Since Zaeed Massani had tracked him down and nearly killed him on Zorya, Vido had been forced into a shadowy existence on the fringes of the civilized galaxy. His base of operations here in the furthest corner of the Terminus Systems was testament to his very real fear, no matter his bluster, of dying at Massani’s hands. This was reinforced by the information Dal’Serah had brought with him.

“You’re a real liability to the Blue Suns, Santiago. You can’t show your face anywhere in the Verge
without it being reported back to the Alliance. Little bastard you hired out of the Spec Ops school on Luna virtually fucked any attempts to run operations in that part of the galaxy.”

Vido took a swallow of the green ale in front of him as he thought about this continuing problem. It was like a festering, open sore on his ass, and it always came down to the Systems Alliance. “Joesiar’s been locked up on the Citadel for a number of weeks now … no one has seen ‘im or talked to ‘im, not even his fat-assed general uncle. Alliance lockup … impossible to get anyone in to flush the miserable little turd down the sewer. And what of the Normandy and that new captain? They still in port?”

“Hmm … most of their crew is on leave, but their Captain Cody is transferring new people onto the ship, making it ready for departure,” Dal’Serah replied. “ Probably go out in ten, twelve days. Joesiar’s failed attempts at murdering that ex-Cerberus bitch on the Citadel is what turned the Alliance against us, especially this Captain. Problem is, Zaeed Massani is on that ship, Vido … he’s sworn to put your head on a pike, and the Alliance is backing his hunt. I even heard he’s been promised alone time with you in a locked room.” Dal’Serah’s expression turned hard as Vido laughed. “I don’t think you’re taking this threat seriously, human,” he said in a raised voice. “Massani spent ten long years hunting your ass down … you gave him the slip through a fortunate turn of circumstances and a bit of luck, but he’s still planning to beat you to death with his bare hands.”

Vido took another swallow of beer, wiped his mouth and leaned forward. “Massani, even with help from the Alliance, ain’t got a chance in hell of finding me, much less killin’ me.” Santiago’s outward show of bravado was in direct conflict with his own doubts and misgivings, but he continued talking to Dal’Serah as if he had no worries. “The Alliance, Commander Shepard, Cerberus … they’ve all cost us millions of credits, Dal’Serah … millions! I intend to collect on that debt … soon, preferably in blood.”

Dal’Serah tilted his head to the right as he watched for a reaction. “You may wish to include Aria T’Loak in that group of debtors, Vido … she’s had a blue hand in ruining a number of recent operations.”

The reaction to Dal’Serah’s show of disrespect came as a complete surprise—a fist appeared seemingly out of nowhere, striking him between his lower eyes and knocking him out of his chair. As the stunned batarian flopped around on the dirty floor in an attempt to regain his feet, an annoyed Vido Santiago stood over him. “You should be glad I’m in a forgiving mood today, Dal’Serah, otherwise I’d kick your fucking ribs in for being so goddamned disrespectful.”

Holding his bleeding face with one hand, the batarian finally managed to regain his feet. Before he could move or say anything, Vido had one hand around his throat, the other balled up in a fist, cocked and ready to fire. “You don’t need to worry about that blue whore running Omega … she’ll be dealt with in good time. Now get your ass back to the Verge, and don’t even think of returning until you have some positive news for me. I want to know every move Massani makes off that ship, and I want to know the instant the Normandy departs from its dock, understand?” Vido let go of Dal’Serah’s throat and gave him a shove to get him moving before calmly returning to his table and his beer.

As mad and embarrassed as he was at being dropped on the deck by Vido, Dal’Serah knew it would be futile to attempt any retaliation … at least for now. Perhaps the next time they met, Vido Santiago would be groveling on the deckplates. Dal’Serah went to the restroom to clean up, then hurriedly left for the batarian docks. It was a two-relay jump to the Widow System, and he didn’t want to be on the freight transport any longer than absolutely necessary.
Garrus Vakarian kept both hands on his assault rifle, ready to bring it up and blast anything that moved. Iringù-Eßizkur had performed a flawless docking maneuver with a major piece of the fragmented station, having to simultaneously rotate and pitch in order to lock her legs to the outer shell over the entry hatch.

This section of the station still possessed life support; Garrus, who was fully suited for a non-atmo environment, suspected this was due to the station’s main power generators being located near the bottom of this broken section; the two other major sections were totally cold. Ultimately, the only power any surviving clones would require would be that which was needed to keep stasis generators energized.

Garrus had his comms unit constantly ‘open’ so Liara would be able to hear whatever he said; additionally, the turian had a small imaging device clamped to the torso section of his suit, transmitting video to a recorder next to Liara’s console. Anything discovered while he prowled the corridors of this ghost station would be recorded for further analysis after he was off the station.

The only things discovered so far were mechs—lots of mechs—all disabled, most destroyed. There were portions of the station neither Shepard nor Taylor had traversed during their escape—at least one of those sections was thought to contain a still active YMIR Mech, based solely on the power draw within, although there was no visual proof.

Garrus followed the trail of ‘dead’ LOKI Mechs to a freight elevator, which took him up a half-level to a balcony. There were more mechs scattered about; he even encountered a few places where FENRIS Mechs had exploded due to catastrophic overloads. After taking a few more turns and opening several collision hatches, Garrus found himself in a rather large compartment; it appeared there had only ever been one occupant in this place—one medical bed, with a number of specialized tools and devices surrounding it—appeared to have been Shepard’s ‘home’ for the nearly two years it had taken for Miranda to complete her reconstruction.

Standing in the center of the room, Garrus slowly turned in a circle as he asked in a quiet voice, “Liara? Are you receiving this? Looks like what Miranda and Shepard described as the main operations area for her reconstruction.” Garrus’ love for Shepard had him thinking about every day she had spent on that cold metal surface, like a side of meat in a butcher’s shop. “Spirits! I can’t imagine how people can do the kinds of things that must have gone on in here.”

“Looks as if you found what we came looking for, Garrus. We just need to see if there are any storage compartments nearby. Give me a few minutes … I’ll send this to Harbinger so he can relay it to Miranda on board the Hong Kong. She should be able to direct where we need to go next.”

Garrus acknowledged Liara as he continued to explore this large chamber—in reality, a laboratory—dedicated to using Reaper tech to experiment on humans; all of his senses were at full-alert in this unnaturally quiet place. Normal background noise for a space station were nearly absent here; the sounds of HVAC fans was muted, coolant pumps subdued. Garrus knew his imagination would play tricks with his perception, so he concentrated on listening.

He could hear distant sounds, as if from the station’s lower levels. Rhythmic. Metallic. Never closer, never farther, always the same volume. Garrus knew the source when his gaze fell to some objects on the deck … the shattered remains of a LOKI Mech. “Liara, there’s at least one surviving mech on this section. Sounds as if it’s on a lower level … not getting any closer, yet. Is there any way you can isolate the levels below the airlock deck? Fighting my way through a bunch of mechs in order to reboard Iringù-Eßizkur is not something I wish to do.”
“Connection to the station’s AI was severed when the station broke apart,” came Liara’s reply. “Elevators from the lower levels terminate on the hanger deck—which is the airlock deck. There’s no way to lock those shafts out from here, Garrus.”

“Is it possible to lock them remotely by using a control terminal in this lab”

“Miranda should be back online in a few minutes, Garrus … I’ll ask her.”

Liara’s answer to Garrus’ inquiry was anything but welcome news. “Miranda said the lab you’re in is where Shepard’s reconstruction took place, but …”

Garrus thought, Dammit! There’s always a ‘but’ …

“… the cloned bodies were stored on one of the lower levels … possibly on the level where you’re hearing mech activity. The Illusive Man wanted the stasis pods as close to the station’s power source as possible … even with independent power supplies, he felt there was less likelihood a power disruption would compromise the pod’s contents.”

“Feel like joining me for a bit of exploration, Liara?” Garrus chuckled lightly. “I’d feel a whole lot better with you watching my six.”

“I’ll suit up. Before you return to the hanger deck, there are two terminals I need you to inspect. The one closest to Shepard’s … bed … will have all of Miranda’s notes concerning the reconstruction of Shepard’s body.”

Garrus looked in the indicated direction. “I see it. You want a download to my omnitool? I can copy the data onto an OSD as well.”

Garrus could hear the smile in her voice as she responded, “An OSD would be fine. The other terminal is close to the entry door … it has notes concerning modifications to her biotic amp, along with the rest of the Reaper-based hardware used.”

“I’ll take care of it and meet you on the hanger deck.”

♦ DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Solem Dal’Serah scrolled through the messages that had accumulated in his ‘in-box’ during his trip to Susskind Station. Most were routine status updates and queries concerning Blue Suns operations in the various areas of Delta Ward; one message instantly caught his attention.

A human member of the Suns, one Quintin Yang, had sent a report concerning Zaeed Massani; the old merc had recently been seen walking towards the Alliance docking facility, embracing and in the embrace of a young human female; this female was wearing the uniform of an Alliance Marine, so was certainly a capable foe, but the fact that Massani had been seen holding a woman as he walked indicated more than a passing interest on his part, suggesting a possible vulnerability capable of being exploited.

Dal’Serah sent a message to his chief-of-staff to bring Quintin Yang in to see him. The batarian didn’t often mingle with the foot-soldiers and ground-pounders that formed the bulk of the Blue Suns’ members … perhaps he needed to rethink that strategy. In the meantime, he needed to talk to Yang, learn if there was anything else to this report that hadn’t been included. If it turned out Massani was actually infatuated with this woman, Dal’Serah might just have the wedge he needed to not only stop Massani before his hunt for Vido even started, but to also elevate his own position within the Blue Suns. He leaned back in his chair to contemplate how to best take advantage of this
gift.
Under A Cold Blue Sun

Letting your guard down, even for a moment, invites death. — Peter V. Brett, The Desert Spear

NOTES: Air temperature references, unless denoted (i.e., Kelvin) are always metric (Celsius)

AP enhanced rounds – Armor-Piercing Ammunition

OSD – Optical Storage Device or Disk

♦ INSIDE THE REPOSITORY ŽIUK’DURMAH · APPROACHING SUR’KESH ♦

Traynor’s attempt to remotely scan the salarian corvette Shadow Shield proved inconclusive; she could not obtain a detailed enough view of the airlock to confirm structural damage to the ship’s pressure hull. Žiuk’Durmah. I’m going to use the personal transport, fly over to the Shadow Shield to inspect its hull.” Turning to Tali’Zorah, Sam said, “I need you to stay here, Tali … monitor their ship as I fly towards them. I’ll park on the platform and use my omnitool to inspect for any fractures that could cause a hull breach.”

Leaving the compartment, she straddled the nightmarish looking … hovercycle … was the only term she could think of to describe it. Žiuk’Durmah activated the machine; Traynor leaned her torso along the top as she had done before. As there was already heated atmosphere in the vast chamber, she left her helmet off as the machine eased through the hatch. Traynor had a new appreciation for the size of the area in front of her as she slowly flew towards the Shadow Shield, moored, it seemed, in the same spot as the Normandy had been for its own voyage from the far rim of the galaxy.

In less than two minutes, Traynor found herself hovering over a large platform on the starboard side of the corvette. Activating her comm unit, she said, “Shadow Shield. This is Chief Warrant Officer Samantha Traynor. I am parked outside your starboard airlock … please respond.”

Sam’s wait for a response was short. “This is Captain Hosarth Renik. What do you want?”

Sam caught herself thinking, …a bit of gratitude for us saving your miserable ass would be nice, as she replied in an even voice, “I am going to perform a scan of your pressure hull around this airlock.” Dismounting from the hover-cycle, she asked, “Does the hatch still operate?”

“Standard operating procedures do not allow for cycling the airlock unless the integrity of the hull is known.”

Traynor scanned the metal around the hatch frame; having found no indication of damage, she responded, “You may safely operate this airlock, Captain Renik. I have scanned the metal surrounding the hatch frame … I am only able to find a few micro-fractures, none of which will prevent safe operation of the hatch. You can have non-essential personnel leave the ship for ground-based shuttles to retrieve.”

Sounding puzzled, Renik replied, “Ground-based? From where?”

“Sur’Kesh, of course. Žiuk’Durmah will be entering the planet’s atmosphere shortly. Leave your pilots and engineers aboard to run the ship … you can safely return the Shadow Shield to your home port without reentering the vacuum of space.”

Traynor moved to stand beside the still idling hover-cycle and waited for half a minute before saying,
“Shadow Shield, respond please.”

The outer hatch moved inwards to clear the hull seals before pivoting to the side, revealing six salarians dressed in service uniforms, led by a seventh wearing a bit of decorative braid, marking him as the officer in charge; all were holding heavy pistols, each of which was aimed squarely at Traynor. The salarian in the fancy uniform said, “I am Captain Hosarth Renik. You are now a prisoner of the Salarian Union, human.”

As four of the six regular troops began moving toward her, Samantha simply said, “I don’t think so, Captain … Žiuk’Durmah!” A kinetic barrier instantly appeared, surrounding and suspending Traynor in a translucent, blue-tinted energy field just as the first two crew members reached her. Both were repulsed backwards into the two following, nearly causing all four to fall over the edge of the platform.

Captain Renik, looking as if he might become the victim of an apoplectic fit of rage, finally managed to speak. “This is an outrage! You have been lawfully declared a prisoner of the Salarian Union. You must comply with my orders!”

“On what charge and whose authority are you attempting to arrest me, Captain? Seems to me this construct …” she waved her arms around over her head, “… rescued your vessel, along with you and your crew. Unless you are in command of the pirates the Salarian Navy was attempting to capture.” Switching her comms to her private channel, she said quietly, “Tali, have Žiuk’Durmah contact whichever ship is shadowing us—I think it’s the Black Star. Have him ask the captain for the name of the hijacked ship.”

Captain Renik, unable to get at Traynor, paced angrily around the platform; Tali’Zorah’s response to Traynor’s request came within ninety seconds: “The Black Star says the Shadow Shield is the pirate vessel—the captain and crew are wanted criminals whose capture would be appreciated. What should we do, Specialist? They are all salarian … whose word do we take?”

Sonovabitch! she thought. All I set out to do was get this damned Reaper functional again, and damned if my attempt at a good deed hasn’t bitten me right in my fuckin’ ass! Shit! Traynor sighed as she made up her mind. “Tali, have Žiuk’Durmah tell the Black Star he’s going to land at the edge of the Talat Spaceport. He can wrap the Shadow Shield in a kinetic bubble, shove it out the hatch and set it on the ground. The salarians can take care of their own fucking problem. Žiuk’Durmah, you’ll have no problems leaving the salarian home world’s gravity well, will you?”

>None, Traynor-Specialist. For your safety, I suggest you allow me to return you to the control compartment. I will rotate the artificial gravity in that region of my structure as I make landfall so you will still be standing on the floor beneath you. I will set the Shadow Shield out, then resume our return voyage to the Citadel.<

Captain Renik had become so impatient with being ignored by Traynor he aimed his heavy pistol and took three shots at her, hoping the third round would penetrate the kinetic barrier surrounding her. Fortunately, Žiuk’Durmah had foreseen this eventuality, fortifying Traynor’s protective barrier substantially as Renik fired. The previously translucent barrier was now an opaque blue.

Traynor had just about had enough of this pompous ass; switching back to her public comms, she said, “Captain Renik, I have some information for you. You and your crew can remain inside the Shadow Shield for the duration of your trip to your home world; once there, we will leave your vessel at the Talat Spaceport, where the crew of the Black Star will be waiting for your arrival.” Remounting her still idling personal transport, she added, “Stay out here if you like—I’m flying back to join my friend … and I just may have Žiuk’Durmah reduce the atmosphere in this area to a point
where you will be a bit more ... manageable.”

Upon saying, “Okay, Žiuk’Durmah … take me back to the control compartment,” the Repository controlled vehicle spun in place as it ascended ten meters; facing the hatch on the far distant wall, it quickly closed the distance and disappeared through the opening, leaving Captain Renik standing beside his ship in an impotent rage.

♦ DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

In his twelve years as a member of the Blue Suns, Quintin Yang had never drawn the notice of any of the ‘higher ups’ in the organization; that he was currently following Krin’lo Pakbagoh into the hidden offices of Delta Ward’s contingent of the Blue Suns did not seem like a good thing. Yang had looked around for a way to escape this personal summons to ‘visit’ with Solem Dal’Serah, but Krin’lo had a pair of batarian enforcers following in trail; neither one seemed inclined to allow a low-life human to escape into the warren of narrow alleys and passageways that were as much a part of the crowded wards as the wide boulevards and promenades were part of the Presidium.

Pakbagoh came to an abrupt stop at a crossroads, reached into a pocket and pulled out a piece of black cloth. “Turn around,” he commanded Yang. With the human facing away, Krin’lo roughly pulled the hood over his head before grabbing his shoulders and spinning him rapidly around several times. “Don’t need you tellin’ the entire ward where our main office is.” One of the enforcers placed a hand on Yang’s left shoulder and shoved him. “Move,” was all he said, which Quintin did, although the tentative nature of his steps didn’t please his guide. “Faster,” came the gruff command from behind, followed by another shove. Quintin attempted to comply, only to stumble and nearly fall within a few meters.

“No use pushing him,” Pakbagoh told the enforcer. “He falls, you get to pick him back up. We have time.” Krin’lo continued to walk, taking a circuitous route to an elevator just inside one of the taller buildings in this section of the ward; entering a six-character code unlocked the doors and allowed Krin’lo to enter behind Yang. He released the enforcers with a wave of his hand, the gesture implying the scrawny human had nowhere to go in this building.

Upon entering another code, the doors closed and the car started down, stopping on sub-level three. As the doors parted, Krin’lo yanked the hood from the human’s head and stuffed it back into a pocket. Waving Yang out ahead of him, Krin’lo said, “Straight down the hall and through those doors.” Feeling as if he was walking towards a firing squad, Yang rubbed his nose and mouth with a trembling hand, then did as he was told. The doors parted as he approached, revealing a nicely appointed waiting room with another room possibly beyond a closed door.

Krin’lo stalked over to the closed door and knocked. A muffled “Enter” accompanied the sounds of the lock disengaging, allowing Pakbagoh to open the door and slide inside the inner sanctum. After several minutes, a span of time that seemed as an eternity to Quinton Yang, Pakbagoh reappeared; standing beside the door, he motioned for Yang to come forward. Thinking, *This must be what a condemned man feels as he’s walking to his date with an executioner*, Quinton did as directed. Reaching the door, he swallowed nervously as Krin’lo motioned him on through. Once inside, the door behind him closed and latched with an ominous sound, as if he had entered some sort of vault. To his right side, sitting behind a rather opulent desk, the backlit figure of Solem Dal’Serah waited without speaking as Quinton approached and stopped a good two meters away from the mysterious batarian.

“Quinton Yang. I have been looking forward to this meeting.” A hand appeared out of the gloom, waving towards a chair next to the wall on Quinton’s right. “Please. Have a seat.”
Yang nervously complied; not daring to sit back, he sat on the leading edge of the seat, hands clasped tightly together resting on his thighs. What does he want?

As if reading his thoughts, Dal’Serah said in a quiet voice. “You recently filed a report concerning your sighting of one … Zaeed Massani … walking towards the Alliance space docks.” A datapad appeared on the desk at the edge closest to the chair in which Yang was sitting. “Your report is on that datapad, Mr Yang. Take it. I want your memory of this event fresh in your mind.”

Quinton picked up the datapad with a shaking hand, thumbed on the internal light source and quickly skimmed through the text.

Lighting a cigar, Dal’Serah took a deep drag and blew a foul-smelling cloud of acrid smoke towards the ceiling. “Well, Mr Yang? Is your report accurately recorded on that device?”

“Near as I can figure it to be, yessir,” Quinton replied in a weak voice. “Zaeed was heading for the Alliance space docks. He had a woman … tall … fit … hanging on his arm. She was wearing an Alliance Marine uniform.”

“Knowing how important it is that the Blue Suns keep track of our enemies, did it not occur to you to follow Massani … discover where he was going?”

Relaxing just a bit, Yang answered, “I might have done so if not for the security checkpoints. Civilians are not allowed on the docks unless accompanied by an active service member.”

“And yet, it seems, Mr Massani was allowed to enter the secured area with no trouble. Did you watch him go through the checkpoint?”

“The girl is what got ‘im through the checkpoint!” Yang declared. “She’s an Alliance Marine, just like I said in that report.”

Dal’Serah sighed as he blew another cloud of odiferous smoke towards the ceiling. “Anyone can buy an Alliance uniform, Mr Yang. You should know that.”

“She was a Marine, I tell ya … no doubt in my mind.” Quinton Yang was absolutely sure of himself now. “I passed ‘em close enough to see her rank insignia … she’s a Master Gunnery Sergeant, Sir, not some no-rank ground pounder. She’s got the tabs on her collar, and the way she carried herself? You may have no respect for Alliance Marines, Mr Dal’Serah, but I guarantee she could kick your ass and two or three of your friends without breaking a sweat.”

The batarian was intrigued … Yang was showing a bit of courage Dal’Serah wasn’t aware he had. “What would you know about Alliance Marines or military rank insignia?”

Yang looked down for a few moments before gathering what little bit of the remaining courage he still possessed. Looking straight at a face he still could not see due to the backlighting, he quietly explained, “Wasn’t always in the Suns … spent four years in the Alliance Navy. Got out when my enlistment was done.”

Dal’Serah leaned back in his chair as he thought about the best way to move forward. After blowing a few more clouds of cigar smoke towards the ceiling, he said, “Mr Yang, here’s what you’re going to do for me ...”

♦ WITH IRINGÙ-EBIZKUR · DOCKED AT LAZARUS RESEARCH STATION ♦

Garrus Vakarian had been waiting on the hanger deck for Liara T’Soni to enter from the airlock; the
deathly silence of this area, coupled with the faint sounds of what he perceived to be mech activity in the lower levels, was just a bit unnerving, enough so that when the airlock doors began opening Garrus crouched into his combat stance as he brought up his assault rifle.

“Garrus! It’s me!” Liara T’Soni had instinctively ducked and raised her hands, the blue glow of a biotically generated barrier instantly taking shape around her.

The embarrassed turian quickly lowered his rifle and approached Liara as she carefully exited the elevator. “Spirits! This place is really getting to me, Liara. The sooner we’re out of here, the better.”

“Agreed. Do you have the OSDs?” Liara took the proffered disks; inserting one in the reader on her omnitool, she activated the playback function and scrolled rapidly though the contents. Not finding what she desired, she inserted the second disk, quickly finding and opening the maps for the station’s lower decks. “Looks like another elevator ride … different shaft.” After looking right and left, she said, “Over this way … it’s more for moving freight up from the storage compartments below. Perhaps the Goddess will smile on us this time.”

Garrus motioned her to the right side of the large double door as he took up station to the left. Assault rifle at the ready, he elbowed the ‘DOWN’ control switch and waited. The mechanism had been sitting unused long enough that it creaked and groaned in protest of being awakened for use again. “How many levels does this shaft go down, Liara?”

“It accesses fifteen levels,” came the response. “However, there are at least twenty-two decks below us. This elevator was designated as a freight carrier, so wasn’t needed at each level.”

As the car came within two floors of the hanger deck, Garrus made ready—the computer in his environmental suit could sense the displaced air from the hoistway as it was pushed past the door seals, like the fetid breath from some other-worldly swamp. “Get ready, T’Soni … no telling what will be in that carrier.”

The cab came to a grinding halt, triggering the door halves to slowly retract into the bulkheads on either side of the opening. Garrus was almost relieved to see a pair of Hahne-Kedar LOKI Mechs folded up on the floor of the elevator. Peering around the edge of the door opening, he used his assault rifle to dispatch them both just as they began activating; the resulting explosions scattered parts and pieces in all directions.

Garrus looked at Liara and quipped, “Guess I wasn’t just hearing things after all.” As they entered the car, he added, “I just hope those are the only type of active mechs on this station … I really don’t want to face down a heavy.”

“Neither do I,” came the ready response from Liara. Entering a code retrieved from the map on her omnitool, she smiled as she entered the results into the elevator’s interface; the doors closed and the car started its trip down to the last deck accessible by this cargo lift. “I believe we’ll find what we’re looking for on level twenty.”

Garrus was beginning to think the car would never reach level twenty when the exceedingly slow rate of travel slowed further, then stopped altogether in front of a pair of doors with the legend COLD STORAGE printed across them in bold text.

Garrus looked meaningfully at Liara as he readied his assault rifle; wordlessly rechecked her heavily-modified M-12 Locust and nodded as he activated the door, then crouched and waited to see what was waiting for them.
They looked out on an enormous chamber, twice as high as what they expected. It was filled with shipping containers arranged in orderly rows with narrow aisles between them from left-to-right; the aisles running lengthwise were wider by about a third. The containers themselves were stacked at least two high—three, in some places—making it difficult to see what might be waiting in between the stacks.

The chamber was deathly quiet, as if waiting for … something. Garrus looked around the edges of the elevator’s open door, attempting to discern if there were any motion sensors close-by. Seeing nothing suspicious on either side or above, he rose to his full height and scanned across the tops of the containers. Looking at the ceiling, Garrus spotted a pair of high-speed cranes that brought back memories of a warehouse on Illium. Docking his assault rifle, he brought out his M-97 sniper rifle in order to utilize its electronically enhanced optical scope. Studying the contents in the lifting rig of each crane confirmed his fears—there were two folded up LOKI Mechs being carried by each crane. Whispering to Liara as he studied them through his scope, he said, “LOKI mechs … four total on two cranes, similar to the warehouse on Illium.” Looking at his asari companion, he said in a quiet voice, “I’ll take those four with my rifle, but only after we’re on the move.”

He continued to speak quietly to Liara. “It’s not particularly cold in here … suit computer pegs it at 4 or 5 degrees; there appears to be several doors along the back wall … perhaps they lead into smaller refrigerated rooms.”

Liara also stood, nodding agreement with the turian’s assessment. “It would make economic sense to isolate several rooms in that manner, as the temperature of each could be set to varying levels of cold … no use freezing this entire chamber if the contents do not require it.”

Setting his rifle to fire enhanced AP rounds, he looked at Liara and asked, “Ready, T’Soni?”

Raising her M-12, she stepped out of the elevator as she grimly replied, “Let’s do this.”

Garrus stepped forward with the asari; moving to his left, he braced his arms and torso against the closest crates. Raising his rifle, he took careful aim at the mech furthest right from his position and fired. Without waiting to see the results, he took the head off the second mech in the lifting rig. Swinging the long gun to the left, he repeated his actions on the next two mechs.

The destruction of the four mechs had an immediate effect on both cranes—they traversed to their respective corners at the rear of the compartment; Garrus said, “I just rang their bells. Let’s go before they can answer.” The pair moved forward at a trot, passing three rows before Garrus slid them into cover again. “Hear that? Mechs activating from standby … sounds like a lot of them.”

Liara held up a hand as Garrus brought his rifle up again. “Not just the mechs, Garrus. The cranes are running again.” The turian looked to the rear corners and saw them—two fresh mechs in the lift rig of each crane. “Spirits! Watch my back, T’Soni.” Once again taking careful aim, a task made more difficult as the crane was moving towards their location, Garrus decapitated each mech by exploding their heads with an AP round; swinging the rifle around to the right, he was horrified to discover that crane was nearly above their position with its deadly load. He’d have to wait until the mechs were dropped from the crane to eliminate them.

Grabbing a blue hand, Garrus ran to the left between the containers. As he passed the fourth one, he spun about and slammed his back into the fifth one; making sure Liara was out of the line of fire, he aimed and fired at the first mech as it was falling from the lifting rig. Of two shots fired, one missed; the second one hit the shoulder joint, blowing off the arm holding the mech’s weapon.

As he was taking care of the first mech, Liara was unloading her M-12’s clips into the second mech, causing it to explode in a shower of shrapnel just before it reached the top of the containers. “We
need to disable those cranes, Garrus.”

Before he could respond, a mechanical voice sounded from the far—or left—end of the row they were on:  **Trespassers! Area off-limits to non-Cerberus personnel. Drop your weapons. Standby for arrest!** The machine continued to approach their position, with three more of the soulless constructs following close behind.

Garrus flared his mandibles as he quickly replaced the clip in his rifle, then docked it in exchange for his assault rifle.  *Glad they can’t walk side-by-side in these narrow aisles!* He nodded as he looked at Liara, who readied herself to throw a Singularity. As the Mechs came within about ten meters of their position, she leaned out of cover and used a Singularity to lift the entire group from the deck. Garrus began ripping them apart with his assault rifle as Liara used a Warp to detonate the Singularity.

Hearing mechanical sounds behind them, Garrus turned and began peppering the leader of six Mechs coming at them along the same aisle. Once again, a Singularity followed by a detonating Warp took care of the Mechs, but Garrus was increasingly worried that he and Liara were in danger of being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of their numbers.  “I think we need to get back to the elevator, Liara. These things have a numerical superiority … We’re going to need some heavier weapons to gain an advantage.”

Liara nodded her head in agreement, saying, “How is it that Shepard always made clearing a room of Mechs look so damned easy?”

Garrus chuckled as he began to walk back to the elevator.  “She’s an N7, Liara … one of the very best of the best. She could flank and kill these things with ease. Us? We have no Dr Chakwas if one of us gets injured, so we have to use a great deal more caution.”

After carefully making their way back to their starting point, Liara was ready to pull up her map of the lower portion of the station when they heard an ominous sound.  A YMIR Heavy Mech had appeared at the far end of the aisle immediately in front of them.

“Spirits! Liara, move!” Garrus dived to the left and turned just in time to see Liara dive to the right. A split-second later, a rocket roared in and exploded inside the elevator car. Garrus crawled up to the edge of the container on his side and asked Liara if she was okay before peering around to look at the Mech. Undocking his sniper rifle, he carefully reached around the container, sighted the thing’s head in the scope and pulled the trigger three times in succession. Amazingly, all three shots found their target, even though it was moving slightly side-to-side; he carefully sent an overload at the monster, which staggered it for a moment before it began firing its twin cannons at Garrus.

As it was targeting Garrus, Liara popped out of cover with a charged Arc Pistol. This had been a gift from Tali’Zorah before they parted company, and Liara used it to devastating effect now; hitting the Mech in the head with a fully charged shot staggered it for a moment and stripped the rest of its shields. Garrus cut loose with another overload, followed by a pair of AP rounds to its head. Firing a rocket at Liara in response to her pistol attack allowed Garrus to take one more shot at its head. When the head exploded in a cloud of fragments, a series of rapidly ascending tones could be heard for several seconds before its eezo power cell exploded in a tremendous fireball, sending up a mushroom shaped cloud of smoke; the shock waves destroyed a number of containers several meters around its position, along with several of the LOKI Mechs, if the tortured electronic squeals were any indication.

Liara stood from behind the containers and looked at Garrus.  “I really thought all these things had been eradicated by the end of our battles with the Collectors.”
Chuckling, Garrus responded with, “Nobody thought to inform the Illusive Man that the mechs were no longer needed … or wanted. I wonder just how many more are in storage down here.”

Something drew the asari’s attention to the container behind which she was standing. The concussive blast from the rocket’s explosion in the elevator had damaged the retainers for its lid, causing it to partially come loose. Peaking inside, she discovered an inactive LOKI Mech folded down on itself, with what appeared to be an M-4 Shuriken machine pistol crated at its feet. “Goddess! There’s an armed Mech in this container, Garrus.” Looking out over scores of containers in the large compartment, she whispered, “Do you suppose there’s a Mech inside each of these shipping containers?”

By way of reply, the turian released the lid retainers on the container he had been using for cover; he lifted it just enough for a quick look inside before gently lowering and relatching it. “Same thing in here. Spirits! If every container has a mech and they all go active, we won’t stand a chance of reaching the other side.” Moving carefully, he backed into the elevator and stood by the control interface as he waited for the asari to follow.

After a quick visual inspection relieved his worry about damage from the explosion, he closed the doors and keyed Liara’s sequence to return them to the hanger deck. They both whispered a prayer of thanks as the car began the return trip to their starting point. “We need to lock this thing out on the hanger level … I really don’t want to reenter here to find a bunch of those things waiting for us.”

“Agreed,” came the asari’s response. “I’ll lock it down with the doors open, but we’ll still need to be careful when we return. The map doesn’t show any alternate means of entry from that deck, but I don’t want to take any chances when we’re this close.” As the car stopped moving and the doors opened onto the dimly lit hanger bay, she locked the car out of the system. “Okay. Let’s get back to Iringù-Èßizkù … plot our next move.”

♦ DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Quinton Yang had been blindfolded and escorted far enough away from the Blue Suns’ office entrance he wouldn’t be able to find his way back; more importantly, he would not be able to tell anyone where the office was located. After been hauled in front of Solem Dal’Serah, the Suns’ Number Two, for questioning concerning his report of seeing Zaeed Massani with a young woman, Yang was now tasked with loitering around the Alliance docks as much as possible without drawing notice from the guards; Yang was to nose around, find out as much as possible about Massani’s situation and attempt to determine if he had been given a berth on one of the two frigates docked in the area in which Yang had seen him.

Dal’Serah really didn’t expect Yang to deliver anything useful concerning the old Merc, or the woman seen accompanying him as they walked towards the docks; he was simply covering his ass against the off chance Vido Santiago learned that Massani had been sighted on the Alliance docks.

Yang walked through a wide alley that paralleled the length of the Alliance controlled docks; the entire length of the passage was home to numerous taverns, bars and sandwich shops. Catering to the Marines and Naval personnel serving on the ships and in the facilities on the docks, as well as the many civilian contractors employed there, they featured spirits, beers and food from nearly every corner of the human’s home planet.

Quinton settled on a pair of ‘sandwich’ shops, across the alley from each other and about 500 meters apart, both of which featured English ale alongside traditional fish’n’chips. The difference in location might be as important to Massani as the quality of the food; Yang felt it was the type of fare that would repeatedly draw Massani back for lunch or a light dinner. The man hadn’t lived so long
by not being extremely cautious in everything he did—perhaps having only one eye had sharpened all his other senses—he was notorious for having an uncanny situational awareness, even while displaying an outward appearance of casual indifference.

Yang could eat lunch in either shop while keeping watch on the other shop’s entry, thus covering two places simultaneously. On his fourth day of staking out the shops, Yang got lucky; Massani came through the front door of the place in which Yang was eating. Accompanied by an Alliance Naval officer, he led the way to the rearmost corner of the small eating area and took a seat with his back to the wall. The officer—a captain, based on the collar bars—took the seat across the table from Zaeed.

Yang immediately cursed his luck, both good and bad. Shit! Can’t hear what they’re saying, can’t move closer without being picked up by the old merc’s radar. Only good thing is I might be able to follow one or the other—find out which ship Massani is interested in, maybe even discover where he bunks at night.

He continued to eat as he surreptitiously studied Massani in the reflection afforded by the mirrored plate glass beside the front door. Zaeed was doing more listening than talking, judging by the way he watched the man across the table. The discussion came to a quick halt as the waitress brought them each a platter piled high with chips—large slices of potato fried in hot oil—and several pieces of beer battered deep-fat-fried fish. Frosty mugs of dark amber ale followed; the two men began by toasting each other with their mugs, after which Zaeed gulped down a third of his own mug’s contents.

Yang finished his own lunch, downed the rest of his beer and got up to leave—the motion caught Zaeed’s attention for a moment or two before he returned to his meal; apparently, Yang didn’t fit Massani’s idea of a threat. After paying for his lunch, Yang strolled out the door as if he was in no real hurry; as soon as he was clear of the place he ran several meters to a service path between two buildings, where he stopped to wait in the shadows.

Unfortunately for Quinton Yang, so intent was he on not losing Zaeed Massani, he completely failed to notice the occasional shimmering of a faint outline—someone wearing a personal cloaking device—in the shadows further down the service passage behind his position.

If Yang lived for another thirty or forty years, he still would not possess the knowledge of a Zaeed Massani … it never occurred to Yang that Zaeed just might have someone guarding his ‘six’ in an overwatch position, someone like Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton, who had persuaded the Normandy’s captain to allow her to shadow Massani while he was outside the perimeter of the Alliance docks.

It had taken her no time at all to spot Quinton’s amateurish efforts at keeping tabs on Massani. There was no doubt in Patton’s mind the diminutive human was a member of the Suns … what she did not understand was why the Suns had assigned this guy to watch Massani, unless … Dammit! He must have seen me walking back to the Alliance docks with Massani and reported it.

The Blue Suns were well aware that Zaeed continued to pose a threat to their leadership as long as he lived, and were hell-bent on ending that threat as soon as possible. It would be just like the scheming cowards to attempt to use a woman to get to Massani. Patton would be damned if she was going to be the downfall of the old merc, so decided to introduce herself to this incompetent spy before he ran back to his handlers. She sent a quick text to Zaeed’s omnitool telling him where to find her, then started moving.

Pulling her M-11 heavy pistol, she silently approached Quinton until she was within arm’s reach of his back. Bracing herself, she decloaked as she touched the muzzle of the Suppressor against his
spine and hissed, “Don’t move.”

♦ TALAT SPACEPORT, SUR’KESH • PRANAS SYSTEM ♦

Žiuk’Durmah had carefully descended to the surface of the spaceport on the outskirts of the salarian capital of Talat. Prior to touching down at the edge of the field, he had raised his kinetic barriers as a precaution against damaging weapons fire.

Once all of his legs made contact with the surface, Traynor and Tali were flown out of the structure astride their hovercycles; as they grounded beside the forward appendage, a squad of heavily armed salarians came rushing up, assault rifles at the ready. As the human and quarian were still within Žiuk’Durmah’s protective barrier, they simply sat and waited as the Shadow Shield, still surrounded by an enormous kinetic barrier, was carefully ejected through the massive portal at the base of the legs, some four to five hundred meters above them. The ship was moved clear of the Repository’s legs near the surface, then set gently down on its landing gear, which protruded through the rapidly dissipating barrier.

During all this, the Black Star had descended from altitude and landed near all the activity taking place under and around Žiuk’Durmah; Captain Tustarth Daezik had commandeered an aircar and after a full-speed run from his ship came to a rapid stop beside Traynor and Tali’Zorah. Having the canopy up before he had even stopped moving, he shouted at the armed contingent to stand-down.

“These people and the former Reaper have done a great favor for the Salarian Union. The Shadow Shield was hijacked, and still has the renegade captain and crew aboard. We need to get them out of there, preferably without loss of life.”

Traynor had been quietly talking with Žiuk’Durmah; he informed her that all the salarians aboard the Shadow Shield had been rendered unconscious. She quickly relayed this information to Captain Daezik as he walked up to Traynor and Tali, then added, “You should still be cautious when you enter … there may very well be self-activating traps or small, explosive trip mines, but the entire crew is out cold … there should be no armed resistance when you board the ship.”

The salarian smiled at Traynor as he thanked her profusely, adding, “I would love to know how you managed to tame one of these constructs to do your bidding.”

Traynor smiled in return. “This Repository carried the Normandy and her entire crew back to civilization from the edge of the galaxy, Captain. Tali’Zorah and I were checking his operational readiness after having to replace his eezo core.” Craning her neck to look up at the colossus, she added, “He saved our lives. Least we could do to repay ‘im.”

Daezik nodded, smiled, then took command of the squad of soldiers. “Come on, men. Let’s get the pirates off that ship before they come to their senses.”

Sammy nodded at Tali as she climbed back onto her conveyance. Activating her comms, she said, “Žiuk’Durmah? Bring us back onboard please; then, see if you can leave this planet without blasting everyone here into dust.”

Acknowledged, Traynor-Specialist. <

No one paid attention to the human and quarian as they began their ascent; shortly after they disappeared within the body of the construct, Žiuk’Durmah engaged his newly replaced eezo core to negate his mass. With a gentle push from his legs, he floated free of the surface of Sur’Kesh and ascended back into space to resume their interrupted return to the Citadel.
Quinton Yang’s heart was literally in his throat as he stood stock still, the cold muzzle of a gun pressed hard against the back of his neck. The voice that had told him ‘Don’t move.’ was feminine … probably the same woman I saw walking with Massani, dammit. To make matters worse, the ol’ merc appeared at the end of the service path and walked straight towards him.

Zaeed fixed Yang with a glare from his good eye and said, “Who the ’ell are you, an’ why are you followin’ me?” Yang had lost his ability to speak the instant his neck had been touched by the cold metal of what felt to be a large caliber weapon. Massani looked past him at Patton, one corner of his mouth tilted up slightly as he nodded ever so slightly; in response, Sandra used her free hand to grab the incompetent spy’s collar as she pulled the M-11 away from his neck.

The armored, gauntleted fingers didn’t feel any better than the muzzle of the gun; the wrist and arm to which it was attached was exerting a bit of force, enough that Yang felt the need to stand on his toes, but at least the threat of an instant death had been averted—for now. As a low-level member of the Suns, he hadn’t expected he’d have to deal with Massani—or the woman behind him—on a personal level. Maybe if he just told the truth they’d let him live. “Solem Dal’Serah sent me … he wants me to keep track of you, Massani. He didn’t say why … just wanted to know what you were doing and where you were staying.”

“Did ’e tell you I wan’ ta see ’im dead?”

Quinton could have sworn he could actually feel the blood draining from his face. Massani confirmed the feeling when he continued, “Humph! Pale as your face is, I’d guess not. Tell you what … You can tell Dal’Serah fer me that when I leave the Citadel, I’m goin’ after Vido Santiago, but not before I skin Dal’Serah alive.”

Yang protested, “I can’t do that, Mr Massani, Sir! He’ll kill me for sure!”

“Suppose that’s a chance you’ll jus’ ave ter take, then.” Looking up at Patton, he finished with, “Let ’im go.”

Sandra activated her cloak as she released the collar she’d been holding and spat out, “Run while you still can, ferret.”

After quickly looking around, Yang ran past Massani, headed for the alley and freedom. He never looked back, so did not see the occasional appearance of the faint outline denoting the presence of a cloaked Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton, trotting along in trail behind him.
Seeking That Which Is Hidden

*In this world, it is too common for people to search for someone to lose themselves in. But I am already lost. I will look for someone to find myself in.* – C. JoyBell C.

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**Ferret** – domesticated form of the European polecat, a mammal belonging to the same genus as the weasel. In the context of this story, it refers to Quinton Yang, a low-level Blue Suns member caught nosing around areas frequented by Zaeed Massani.

**Talashae** – Turian variant of the triceratops. Marrow-bearing bones; essentially, a really big cow for them.

*(source: http://spiritofredemption.wikidot.com)*

**Talas’kak** – literally, *talashae* shit. A human would say *horseshit* or *bullshit* in context. *(source: see *Talashae* above)*

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♦ **DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton had followed Blue Suns member Quinton Yang through a seemingly endless maze of passageways, service tunnels, alleys and catwalks as he trotted in what appeared to be an aimless path towards some unknown destination. The young woman was wearing a personal cloaking device, so did not need to be too cautious about keeping her distance; additionally, the small transmitter she’d attached to the collar of his shirt, its appearance that of a button, was passively answering queries received from her omnitool, sending its location and altitude in transmissions lasting one to two microseconds. When overlaid on a 3-D image of the area of Delta Ward in which she was standing, she could see exactly where Yang was without having him in sight.

Yang, still unaware he was being expertly tailed, finally arrived at the rendezvous site he’d been instructed to seek out – an intersection of two pedestrian paths through a rather run-down collection of one and two-story workshops. Leaning against the wall of a building on one corner, Quinton looked around for his contact, Krin’lo Pakbagoh, the batarian that had brought him to *visit* Solem Dal’Serah in the Blue Suns’ main operations center for Delta.

Ten minutes passed uneventfully – enough time that Quinton began to worry, thinking perhaps he’d made a mistake in coming straight here after talking to Massani. Another five minutes passed, leading Yang to believe he was not going to see the batarian today. He started to slowly walk north, towards the distant Presidium ring, barely visible in the distance. Yang wasn’t sure what to do, as he had no way to contact Pakbagoh; as it was getting late in the day, he decided to go to his small apartment, get some rest and start fresh in the morning. He kept looking around in an attempt to see if he was being followed; there were a number of people walking about, mostly humans, with a few batarians and some turians in the mix. Quinton studied each of the batarians he saw, trying to gauge their affiliation; none appeared to be working for the Suns.

Sandra Patton, on the rooftop of the two-story building on the southwest corner of the intersection, sighed as she watched Yang cut through a service passage between two buildings on the northeast side of the pedestrian path and disappear. She started to rise from her prone position when she caught motion out of the corner of her eye. Turning her head to the right to focus on the movement, she wasn’t pleased to discover a cloaked individual on the roof of the building across the ped-path. Motionless, she watched as the cloak was deactivated, revealing a batarian wearing a standard Blue
Suns uniform.  

He looked around before he moved – Sandra was sure he had seen her, even with her own cloak active, but the improvements touted by the Alliance technical branch had apparently negated any visual advantage previously granted the batarians by having one pair of eyes sensitive to infrared and heat sources; the batarian had completely missed seeing her or the slight bit of visual evidence of a cloaking device.  

She breathed a sigh of relief as he disappeared through the roof access hatch; she carefully got to her feet and moved to leave the roof and building.  Lang’s tracker had become stationary; hopefully he had gone home.  Still cloaked, she left the building through the rear door and took a different route to get to Quinton’s location, being careful to stay in the shadows as much as possible.  In order to shorten the search for Dal’Serah, she needed to visually confirm that Yang’s current location was where he lived.  While she walked, she contacted Massani through her comlink.  “Zaeed.  Looks like our ferret has gone to ground for the night.  I’m going for a visual on the location before I return.  Oh, and he’s being followed by a batarian, also cloaked … probably headed for the same place.”  

“Okay, then.  You be careful, Master Guns.  Der Blue Suns don’t mess ’round, right?”  

“Thanks.  I’ll contact you on my return trip.”  Sandra smiled at Zaeed’s concern for her safety.  She knew he was correct about the Suns—they were not nice people, but she felt confident in her own abilities.  Regardless, she intended to exercise an abundance of caution to ensure her own personal well-being.  

♦ IRINGÙ-ÊßIZKUR, LAZARUS RESEARCH STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM ♦  

Garrus Vakarian and Liara T’Soni had returned to the hanger bay of the shattered main section of Lazarus Station after having a meal and resting aboard Iringù-Êßizkur.  Each was more heavily armed than before; in addition to her M-12 Locust, Liara carried an Arc Projector along with plenty of spare ammo packs.  Garrus had exchanged his assault rifle for an anti-synthetic rifle of quarian design, set to fire cryo ammo.  Garrus felt the splash damage he could inflict would help tip the odds more in his favor against large numbers of LOKI mechs.  

In addition to being better armed against synthetics, they had each donned heavier armor – Garrus was now fully clad in his heavy armor and combat helmet, while Liara had exchanged her light armor cladding for medium strength plates.  They were each wearing heavy-duty kinetic shield generators, which would give them an increased safety margin against the heavy weapons of a YMIR mech.  

As they made ready to board the freight elevator for another foray into the cold storage area, Garrus reminded Liara of the advantages and the limitations of the Arc Projector.  “Range on that thing is about 23 meters, Liara, and it takes two seconds to charge.”  Liara walked into the elevator as Garrus continued, “It ought to work great on tight clusters of mechs, and two shots should completely drop the shields of any YMIR mech that crosses our path.  The weapon won’t target either of us, so feel free to fire over my head when I duck.  Oh, and don’t forget—only pull that trigger if you have a target to shoot—there’s no provision for discharging the capacitors once they’ve been lit up.”  

Liara looked at Garrus as the doors closed behind them.  “You think it’ll be enough?  What about all the mechs in the crates?”  

“I don’t believe we need to worry … Hahne-Kedar always shipped them completely powered down and disarmed … their weapons don’t even have ammo clips.  Unless someone goes through the crates and turns each one of them on, they’ll remain inactive.”
As the slow-moving car gradually ground to a halt, the pair crouched on either side of the door, using the bulkheads as cover against a possibly aggressive welcome. Holding the doors closed, they both listened carefully for any sounds of mechanical movement; hearing nothing but silence, Garrus punched the control to open the doors.

Peering around the bulkheads, they were greeted by the same scene as had existed when they left the compartment—an enormous chamber filled with shipping containers in seemingly endless rows with a number of doors on the far wall. “Okay, Liara, stay on my six … we’re going to go all the way left so we have a wall on our left side as we move through to the far wall … ought to make it more difficult for them to get around us. Ready to go?”

The asari replied by standing, Arc Projector raised. Garrus nodded as he stood and readied his quarian weapon; they both left the elevator, pausing long enough for Liara to get the doors closed and locked against intrusion by anyone or anything but themselves.

Hurrying along between the back wall and shipping crates, the pair reached the corner unimpeded; unfortunately, that’s where their progress slowed dramatically. As Garrus poked his head around the crate at the corner, Liara surprised him by clambering atop the two-crate stack behind him. From this vantage point, she could see movement, both ahead of them along their intended path, and back along the way they had just come.

Whispering, “Garrus …” to alert him, she turned and aimed at the head of the Mech in front of a group of six behind them; firing her Arc Projector returned rather spectacular results, in that all seven exploded from the chained shot, scattering weapons, arms, legs, and pieces all around their position.

Garrus had seen the Mechs coming towards them; stepping out to face them, he fired his Adas weapon, squeezing off three Cryo enhanced rounds. The first two rounds flash-froze eight Mechs; the third round shattered them into icy chunks. Looking up at Liara, he flared his mandibles in an imitation of a grin. “Come on … let’s get to the far side.

It was slow going—Liara had chosen to stay on top of the crates, as the additional height afforded her a somewhat birds eye view of their path and the side aisles they had to pass. Three more encounters with LOKI Mechs ended in the same manner as their first one; however, the lack of success by the LOKI’s triggered the activation of a YMIR Heavy, their only warning the sound of a deep bass mechanical voice saying, ONLINE!

“Talas’kak! T’Soni, get down from there before it targets you!” Garrus couldn’t see the big Mech, but he did hear the sound of a rocket being fired.

Liara dropped to the floor an instant before the rocket screamed overhead; traveling right through the space she had just vacated, it exploded against the wall twelve meters behind them. “We need to have that thing in our line of sight in order to target it,” Liara panted. “It’s at the far wall, about a third of the distance from the corner up ahead … looked like it was moving to intercept us.”

Garrus thought for a moment, then said, “Back down this side aisle three crates. I’ll stop at the second one. We’ll have a chance to fire at it when it passes by the aisles at the far end. You should be able to get two shots off before it can return fire … make sure you’re totally in cover the instant after you fire that second shot!”

With a nod of her head, they moved to their right and took up positions; they did not have long to wait. Liara charged and fired her Arc Projector as the Heavy Mech came into view at the end of the aisle between the second and third row of crates; the charged shot staggered it for a moment, long enough for T’Soni to charge and fire a second time. Not waiting to see the results, she retreated back to the left, moving past Garrus to wait beside the first crate. Facing an aisle too narrow for its bulk,
with nothing to target and its shields stripped by Liara’s shots, the Mech continued on its original path.

As it came even with the next aisle, Garrus emptied his clip at the YMIR, freezing it in its tracks. As he reloaded the rifle, the Heavy Mech exploded in a cloud of icy fragments. Daring to stand, Garrus looked to Liara, who grinned back at him as she said, “Come on … let’s get to those storage compartments.

The pair hurried the last fifteen meters to their goal … the far wall of the storage area. Garrus muttered, “I hope we’ve seen the last of the active mechs guarding this place, but I certainly won’t be surprised to see more, especially with all the crates in here being filled with inactive LOKIs.”

Liara had her omnitool up, attempting to remotely discover the contents of the areas behind the doors. Pausing in front of one door for a moment, she muttered, as if to herself, “What in the name of the Goddess is in here?” She placed a hand with fingers spread on the surface of the heavy panel, as if hoping divination would reveal the answers she sought. There was no denying there was … something …

“Garrus, we need to open this door so I can see what’s inside.”

The turian activated his own omnitool and scanned the door. “Temp on the other side is sub-freezing, T’Soni … around 200 degrees Kelvin. We do not want to be inside for very long. It would probably not be a good idea to allow whatever is in there to warm up, either.”

“It won’t take long for me to determine if the contents are of any interest to us,” she replied, looking through the information stored on the OSD. After a few moments, she had the codes required to unlock and open the door. Entering a bit of text enabled a haptic interface, into which she entered a fourteen character alpha-numeric code. The interface changed color to a green crossbar with a rotating orange ring around it, counting down from 60. Liara looked at Garrus, worry plainly showing in her luminous blue eyes.

As the count reached zero, the orange ring ceased its rotation; the color change to yellow was simultaneous to the metallic sounds of latches being released; within seconds, the door slowly retracted upwards, revealing a shimmery blue kinetic barrier, apparently intended to prevent the compartment from warming up while the main door was open. Liara inspected the barrier closely with her omnitool before easing through it into the darkened cold-room. Overhead lights winked on in response to her entry, allowing her to see three long containers, lined up side-by-side, their appearance not unlike coffins.

She realized these were stasis pods; if the numerous indicator lights near their bases were any indication, then each was powered. The lid of each was equipped with a viewport; Liara approached the middle of the three and used her fingers to scrape the accumulated frost away. Aided by a small light from her omnitool, she looked into the pod. “Goddess!” Placing a hand across her mouth in shocked disbelief, she hurriedly backed away, moving right through the barrier to be gently stopped by Garrus. “What was it, Liara? What did you see?

“It’s incredible, Garrus! In that pod … I need you to look … to confirm for me that my eyes are not playing tricks, Garrus. Please.”

The turian placed an arm around her shoulders and eased them both through the kinetic barrier into the storage area. Garrus took a quick look through the viewport in the top of the middle pod and drew back in stunned surprise. “Shepard! …” He turned to Liara, seeing his own astonishment mirrored in her eyes. “It’s a person that looks like Rachaél Shepard … do you suppose we’ve actually uncovered a clone for the commander?”
When Liara didn’t answer, Garrus reluctantly moved to the pod on the left; using the backs of his talons, he scraped away the icy frost from the surface of the small view port and peered into the pod. Whispering “Rachaël, …” he moved to the pod on the right, cleared its viewport and was rewarded with identical results. Moving back to stand in front of Liara he muttered, “Spirits, T’Soni … There’s a copy of Rachaël Shepard in each of those pods … they look as if they’re simply sleeping. How many clones did Cerberus create … and why? The commander told us she was not a clone. Did Cerberus create these as some sort of insurance, or for spare parts, or? …”

Liara felt like crying with relief that their search was finally a success. “We need to get in touch with Miranda Lawson. She’s the only one left that can tell us what went on here, and we need the Normandy here as well.”

Garrus huffed, “Hell! We need Harbinger here … perhaps he can bring the Normandy with him. Let’s close this compartment and get back to Iringū-Ebbizkur. She’ll be able to contact Harbinger and the Normandy. Looks like we’re staying here for a while.”

♦ DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton glanced up at the ‘sky’ and wished, not for the first time, that a day/night cycle existed in the wards as it did on the Presidium. Inspecting a readout on her omnitool pleased her even less—she was still above the atmosphere limit of seven-to-eight meters, so needed to get back to ‘ground’ level soon. Patton had climbed to the roof of a two-story building across an alley from where her tracker had placed Quinton Yang, and was rather impatiently waiting for him to leave his apartment to do … well, whatever a low-level member of the Blue Suns normally did every day.

Having been caught out following Zaeed Massani, it wasn’t likely he’d attempt to continue doing so without reporting to his handler. Zaeed thought it highly likely Yang would attempt to somehow get in touch with Solem Dal’Serah, probably through an intermediary; as he had failed in that regard six hours ago, Zaeed felt certain he’d make another attempt today.

Massani was waiting as well, on the ground about half-a-click from Yang’s front door. “Heads up, darlin’ … looks like he’s on ‘is way out,” came a voice over her comms.

“On my way down,” Patton replied as she went back through the rooftop-access airlock as fast as it would cycle; she was out the main door just in time to see Yang disappear around the corner across from her location. With her personal cloak engaged, she hurried to catch up as Massani said, “Take yer time, Master Guns … I got eyes on ‘im … he’s not moving very fast. If I ’ad ta guess, I’d say he ain’t lookin’ forward to meetin’ whomever he ’as ter meet.”

“Watch your ass, Zaeed! There’s a cloaked batarian Sun in the neighborhood. Saw ‘im yesterday, but haven’t picked him up yet today.”

“Gotcha, Gunny … dat’s good ter know.”

Sandra continued to double-time it in order to get closer to Zaeed … she didn’t like being so far back she couldn’t watch the old merc. As she got closer to Yang, she spotted Zaeed, flitting from shadow-to-shadow. She also spotted the telltale sign of a cloaked figure across the alley from Massani, standing motionless beside a squat building. “Zaeed! … Get down! Three o’clock!”

Zaeed instantly went down, rolling onto his left side in order to face whatever Sandra had seen; he heard a muffled gunshot as he was diving for the pavement, the bullet pinging off the wall over his head the same instant as he heard the report.
As she warned Massani, Patton undocked, aimed and fired her Helix model 10; the first round missed by centimeters. Before she could correct her aim for a second shot, the Blue Sun infiltrator was gone, the trace of his cloak vanishing into the tiny footpath between the buildings he had been using as shelter.

Patton, rifle docked, shield generator deactivated, approached Massani from the side as he got to his feet. “Thanks, Master Guns. That bullet really ’ad me name on it … guess da Blue Suns ain’t give up on killin’ me.”

Upon hearing the gunfire behind him, Quinton Yang had disappeared into the warren of alleys and footpaths between the closely spaced buildings. Looking ruefully in the direction Yang had been moving, Patton remarked, “We could go find him if you’d like.”

He smiled back at Sandra as he replied, “Too many places fer ’im ter go ter ground in dis area. Better ter come back in a few days, stake ’is apartmen’ out, catch ’im as ’e leaves.” Grabbing Patton around the shoulders with his left arm, he added, “Come on, then … Le’s get back ter da docks. I’m ready fer a wee spot o’ lunch.”

As the pair began walking away, Zaeed muttered to himself, “Dal’Serah, I’ll be back fer ya, an’ you’ll never see me coming.”

♦ ALLIANCE SYSTEM DOCKS, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Tali’Zorah and Samantha Traynor stepped out of the Normandy shuttle after being retrieved from within Žiuk’Durmah’s massive hanger bay by Lieutenant Sherri Morse, whose parting shot was, “You ladies aren’t going to make a habit of needing me to provide a taxi ride every time you go for a joy ride, are you?”

Traynor smiled and waved as she headed down the ramp to the docks. “You coming along, Tali?”

“I need to work on the ship’s environmental programs for Mr Donnelly,” she replied, waving at Sammy as she proceeded towards the elevator. “He’s going to be completely in charge of the HVAC systems, and I want to be sure the programs are simple enough for him to operate.”

“Okay then … maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.” Traynor was more than ready for a hot bath and a hot meal after riding around in an uncomfortable … warship? Dreadnaught? She wasn’t really sure of the description she needed to assign to a former Reaper, now a sentient Repository of all the information from a civilization … an entire species, extinct from the galaxy for over 50,000 years. She did know it was not a passenger friendly way to travel.

As she walked towards the base housing area, a number of things were being put in motion that would have a profound effect on everyone connected with the Normandy and the Hong Kong II.

♦ SSV NORMANDY · DECK TWO, WAR ROOM & QEC COMPARTMENT ♦

Captain Bill Cody entered the War Room to be confronted by the image of Harbinger in the middle of the round status display; his XO, Lieutenant Commander Greg Adams, was standing on the far side of the display, visible through the semi-transparent projection of the enormous Repository. Cody asked, “Any idea what they want, Greg?”

“No Sir. Just received a message that Žiuk’Durmah is back in the system with a fully powered eezo core, and Harbinger has some information for us.” Greg motioned Cody to go before him, then
followed his captain into the QEC compartment. Once Cody was standing at the rail, he touched a
control to answer the hail from the other party; surprise was plain on his face when an image
resolved into that of Garrus Vakarian and Liara T'Soni. Cody quickly whispered to Greg, “Get
Shepard in here.”

“Captain Cody,” Liara started. “We’re in the Stre nuus System aboard Iringu-Ebizkur, who is
currently docked to the largest remnant of the Cerberus facility known as Lazarus Research
Station.” She paused as she looked past Cody’s shoulder to see Rachaël appear in the doorway and
move to ‘stand’ beside Cody. “Rachaël …” Her voice sounded strained, as if she’d been
unprepared to see Shepard’s projected image.

Returning her gaze to Cody, she continued, “Garrus and I have found what we’ve been searching
for, Captain. Now we need the Normandy and Miranda Lawson to rendezvous here. There are
three human females in stasis pods, all in cold storage. Their faces …” Liara stopped speaking,
attempting to get her emotions in control. “Faces … of all three are …” she looked at Shepard’s
projected image beside Cody as she choked out, “… all three have the face of … Rachaël Shepard.”

Cody was momentarily speechless. When he was able to once again form words, he asked, “Do you
believe any of the three is a viable candidate for reanimation?”

Garrus responded for Liara, saying, “All three are in stasis—the pods are powered and all the
system indicators were green, Captain. Any of the three would probably be a good candidate, but
that’s not all, though.” Garrus looked down at Liara, then returned his attention to Cody and
continued. “We only entered one cold room, Captain. There are two other rooms we did not enter
which may also contain stasis pods. Miranda Lawson should be aware of what was being done
here, unless the Illusive Man was performing experiments behind her back.”

Liara spoke up again, saying, “We had to fight our way to that storage room, Captain. The entire
floor in the main storage area is covered with deactivated LOKI mechs, still in their shipping crates,
stacked two and three deep in places; somewhere in the back there were active mechs, including a
few YMIR Heavies. No more appeared before we came back up to the station’s hanger deck, but I’d
guess there might be more when we go back in there.”

Cody turned and whispered to Adams, “Greg, have Lieutenant Morse warm up a shuttle. I need to
go to the Orizaba … talk to the admiral. Oh, and have Captain Yuán meet me at the hanger bay
ramp … this concerns Miranda, so Yuán will most likely be bringing the HK II along for the ride.
It’ll be good to have some backup once we get out there.”

Greg nodded and left as Cody returned his attention to Vakarian and T'Soni. “I’ll go see the admiral,
let him know what’s happened. It’ll take a day or so for us to leave the docks, but we’ll probably
be getting rides inside Reaper structures anyway, as there are still inoperable relays between us. Hell,
we have to recall the crew before we can leave, so let me get back to you in … say … eight hours.”

Garrus nodded. “Understood, Captain. I hope what we’ve discovered will be worth all the time
and energy that’s gone into this undertaking.”

“As do I, Vakarian. Talk to you in eight hours …”

Liara spoke up quickly before the connection terminated. “Commander Shepard? A word alone,
please?” She moved slightly as Garrus left the conversation to his friends.

Cody nodded at Shepard’s image as they moved past each other; Rachaël stopped at the center of the
railing and offered an observation: “Hey, Blue … You look amazing. Seems that riding around in a
former Reaper and blasting mechs apart agrees with you.”
Liara looked down for a moment; returning her gaze to her promised, she said, “Rachaél ... I have missed you ... terribly. Seeing your features on a human female in a stasis pod was a bit ... unsettling.”

Shepard nodded as she responded, “Liara, I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for you, or Garrus … being the only two people aboard a Reaper Destroyer, searching for former Cerberus installations. It sounds to me as if your search has been successful, especially if there are three clones in stasis there.”

“Hurry, Rachaël. I need to see ... you, on the Normandy ... need to speak with you before... well, before any attempt is made to join you to one of these clones.”

Rachaël felt as if her heart was being ripped apart at Liara’s anguished statement. “I’ll see you soon, Blue. Everyone on this ship and on the Hong Kong wants this for me … for us. Stay strong. I’m looking forward to seeing you in person again.”

Saying, “I love you, Rachaël,” Liara closed her eyes as she ended the call, causing her projected image to dissolve away as the power to their QEC was cut.

Shepard decided to ‘walk’ back through the war room, where she found Captain Cody speaking with Harbinger, whose image still hovered over the status display in the lower area; he was stating, “Cody-Captain. As the receiving relay in the nebula is still being repaired, Žiuk’Durmah or myself will carry Normandy-frigate and Hong Kong-frigate to the Strenuus System.”

Cody looked at the projected image of the oldest Repository in existence as he replied, “Thank you, Harbinger. I will inform Admiral Hackett of your offer.”

“There is more. Within the Styx Theta Cluster are two human constructs. High probability these were Cerberus created, purpose unknown. We should investigate both for possible information.”

Cody nodded as he replied, “Very well, Harbinger. Your assistance is welcome.”

“My assistance is required, Cody-Captain. Repositories are responsible for The Shepard’s existence in the Normandy computer core. It is our responsibility to see her made whole again.”

As the image faded away in a swirl of blues and reds, Shepard asked Cody, “Do you think the Admiral will approve sending two ships to meet with Iringù-Eßizkur?”

Cody smiled at the projection. “Commander, I’d almost bet he’ll want to come along for the ride. Don’t you worry … we’ll get there as fast as we can.

◆ SHUTTLECRAFT CHARLIE-ONE · SSV NORMANDY ◆

Lieutenant Morse contacted Alliance docking control as soon as she had the UT-47a clear of the Normandy’s hangar bay; receiving clearance to fly out to the Orizaba, she checked to make sure her passengers were all harnessed in their seats.

Onboard were Captain Cody, Captain Yuán Xiùlán and Specialist Miranda Lawson, who were quietly talking among themselves about the mission on which they would be embarking. Yuán was advocating they bring another frigate along. “The Stalingrad would be an excellent addition, Bill; Captain Martinez and his crew would benefit greatly at being relieved, if only for a short time, of having to retrieve all the organic remains orbiting Earth, and from the sounds of things at Minuteman Station, having the maneuverability and firepower of a third frigate would be a good thing.”
"I'm not so sure, Xiùlán … I seriously doubt there's anything in that station worth losing a ship over," Cody replied thoughtfully. "However, twenty-four gun emplacements is a significant number. I can't imagine what would be so valuable onboard to merit that level of defense." Looking at Miranda, he asked, "Any ideas on that, Ms Lawson?"

"No, Sir. The *Normandy* SR2 was launched from that facility after I brought Shepard and Jacob Taylor from Lazarus. We used a shuttle to reach Freedom's Progress, returned to the station, then set out in the *Normandy*. That was the last time I was there. There may still be some materials from the Commander's reconstruction stored there … research records, laboratory supplies and the like."

Yuán looked at Cody as she said, "I agree that docking there may carry some risk, but it may be the station's VI fired on Iringù-Eßizkur because she's a Reaper Destroyer. Will the VI target Alliance vessels?"

"Not something I wish to find out, but if we're careful, position our ships to maximize our defensive capabilities, it'd be relatively simple to find out."

Sherri’s voice carried around the bulkhead: “Arriving at the Orizaba …”

♦ SSV ORIZABA, ADMIRAL HACKETT’S OFFICE · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Captains Yuán and Cody, along with Specialist Lawson, were ushered into the admiral’s office, where they remained standing until Hackett himself entered through a doorway at the rear of the room. Waving them towards the chairs arranged at the front of his desk, he offered them each a glass of water before taking his own seat behind the desk. "What can I do for you today, Captains?"

Cody looked at Yuán, then began, "Sir, Garrus Vakarian and Dr Liara T'Soni contacted us this morning from the Strenuus System—they're currently hard-docked to the major remnant of Lazarus Station." Cody paused, handing a datapad to the admiral before continuing. "They found three bodies in stasis chambers in the lower levels, Sir. All three have the facial features of Commander Rachaél Shepard. With your permission, we'd like to employ either Harbinger or Žiuk’Durmah to carry the *Normandy* and the *Hong Kong* to that system to determine if it's possible to join Shepard’s … spirit? Her consciousness? … with one of the cloned bodies stored there."

Hackett leaned back in his chair, stroking his chin as he thought about their request. He skewered Miranda with his eyes and asked, "I presume Captain Yuán brought you along as technical support?"

Miranda looked down for a moment, then returned Hackett’s gaze with equal intensity. "Sir, I’m on the *Hong Kong* out of necessity—the original intent was to shield me from Blue Suns retribution; I was stationed at Lazarus—it’s where we brought Rachaél Shepard back from the dead to fight the Collectors. It was necessary to create living clones from her cells in order to have … spare … organs, in case Rachaél was seriously injured in combat with the Collectors. The clones do have brains, but they're blank except for autonomous functions, like breathing, digestion, that sort of thing, so in that sense they are functioning human females, just not self-aware."

Hackett thought about this for several moments before asking, “So, you would simply choose one of the cloned bodies to receive Shepard’s … life-force?"

“Yes, Sir. I’d check each of them closely, determine which one would have the best chance of surviving the procedure, keep the others in reserve.""
“Garrus and Liara reported that Iringū-Eßizkur was targeted by Minuteman Station’s VI when they approached. It’s the station the Normandy SR-2 left from on its original voyage to stop the Collectors.”

Yuán continued the explanation with, “Bill and I feel that having a second frigate along to assist in boarding that station would be a good thing—in fact, I’d like to have a third ship along with us—perhaps the Stalingrad?”

The surprised look on Hackett’s face as he leaned back in his chair would have been cause for alarm if any but Yuán had been so bold. Hackett’s expression became somber as he thought about how best to ensure there’d be a successful outcome to the mission. After thoroughly weighing all the pros and cons, he leaned forward again, placed his forearms on the polished desk and clasped his hands together. “I realize that frigates … and corvettes … have a better defensive edge when working in mini-wolf pack configurations, but we are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the quantity of ships the fleet has available.” He shifted his attention between Xiūlán and Bill as he continued, “Sending even two ships together is a risk—we don’t have any presence in that region of space—there’s no backup if anything goes terribly wrong, so I’m afraid I cannot authorize a third ship on this mission. I’ll be hanging my ass out in the breeze just sending you two.”

Cody nodded his head as he replied, “I understand, Sir. But we will have an advantage over anything likely to oppose us in space—there’ll be at least two Sovereign-class Reapers and a Destroyer with us. Once we’re there, Iringū-Eßizkur will also be available. I feel confident we’ll complete the mission at Lazarus and be able to dock with and board the Minuteman Station, Sir. At the least, we’ll take down or reprogram the VI running that station’s defenses.”

Hackett nodded; as he stood up, Cody and Yuán followed suit. “Okay, Captains. Get your ships ready and leave when you’re both ready. I’ll expect daily updates on your progress; stay alert out there—obtain as much intel as you’re able while in the nebula.”

Bill and Xiūlán replied in unison, “Aye-aye, Sir.” “Thank you, Sir”

♦ DELTA WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Quinton Yang started running the instant he heard gunfire behind him. There were two shots, from two different weapons, of that he was sure—not that he took the time to look back to see who was firing or at what they were firing—any time he heard weapons fire close by, especially behind him, the survivor portion of his brain—what some might call the coward portion—kicked in.

Outwardly, it appeared that he was blindly running, but Yang knew the narrow alleys and foot paths in this region of the ward exceedingly well. He turned down what appeared at the entrances as dead-end paths only to go left or right at the far end, sliding between buildings that might only be 75 centimeters apart. After ten minutes of this, Yang paused in the shadows at the outlet in an alley a block from his apartment. Panting from exertion, he placed his back to the wall and leaned forward to rest his hands on his thighs, straining to hear anything over the rushing sound of his own blood being pumped past his eardrums.

Gradually catching his breath, he continued to listen for anything out of the ordinary. The neighborhood was always quiet, even with the numerous buildings that were home to light industrial businesses. People living here kept to themselves, did little talking, doing their best to avoid attracting attention—attention that often times included the business end of a heavy pistol.

Having heard or seen nothing that aroused his suspicions, he darted between shadows until he was standing at the door to his one-room apartment. Of all the regrets Quinton Yang had about choices
he had made in the past, his decision to open that door without checking its intrusion tracker would prove to be his biggest regret to date.

SSV NORMANDY · DECK TWO, CIC

Captain Bill Cody stood on the platform behind the galaxy map and zoomed in on the area to which he intended to travel. The Horsehead Nebula was relatively close to the Citadel, but the relay in the Pax system had yet to be repaired, thus making it necessary for the Normandy and the Hong Kong to utilize the services of Žiuk’Durmah to transit the enormous distance in a reasonable amount of time. Harbinger would accompany them, as would the Hong Kong’s guardian Destroyer, Asharru.

Once in the nebula, both frigates would be released from their ‘mother ship’ to navigate the space between systems under their own power. First stop would be the Strenuus System, there to rendezvous with Garrus and Dr T’Soni at the remnants of Lazarus Station. Cody also intended to investigate Minuteman Station, if for no other reason than to reprogram the station’s VI to not fire defensive weapons unless fired on first.

Cody activated his comms unit. “Lieutenant Morse, status report, please.”

Sherri replied within seconds: “We’ll be done in less than an hour, Sir … final food supplies are being brought aboard, along with the medical equipment and supplies requested by Miranda Lawson.”

“Thanks Lieutenant. You’re going to start seeing people coming through that hatch as well … I’ve issued the recall for our crew members ashore. Keep me advised on your status.”

“Aye, Sir.”

Cody next messaged the flight deck. “Mr Moreau … you may start your pre-launch checks. As soon as Mr Donnelly and Ms Daniels are aboard, we’ll begin propulsion and environmental checklists.”

“Roger that, Sir.”

As an afterthought, he asked, “Is Ms Coré on the bridge?”

“Negative, Captain,” came Joker’s response. “I believe she’s in the server compartment on deck three.”

“Thank you, Flight Lieutenant.” Cody thought briefly about Edi’s purpose on the Normandy, concluding that she was most likely conversing with Shepard in the server.

DECK THREE, SERVER COMPARTMENT

Edi was, as surmised by Captain Cody, engaged in a discussion with Rachaël Shepard in the server. “It will be fine, Shepard. Miranda will be here, as will Karin Chakwas.”

“That is not what concerns me, Edi. What does concern me is the viability of cloned bodies, human bodies, after so many months in stasis. They were, what? … created? … grown? … from my original tissue? That process was probably started right after Miranda laid my body on the table at Lazarus. That was over three years ago, Edi.”

Edi didn’t have a good answer for Shepard, and said as much. “I do not believe Karin or Miranda
would risk your continued existence by attempting to join you with a physical shell that is in less than optimum condition. Liara spoke of three stasis pods; all are powered. Garrus and Liara haven’t explored the entire storage area, so there is a high probability that more pods exist. Having the *Hong Kong* and *Normandy* on site will enable a safer and more thorough exploration of the remaining areas of that station.”

Shepard’s reservations were quite plain as she responded, “As much as I want to hold Liara in my arms again, to actually feel her body in contact with mine, to feel her breath on my neck, I am not afraid of death, Edi. Hell, I jumped into that damned energy beam knowing I was going to die … yet, here I am. Honestly, what scares me the most is how my dying, again, would affect her.”

“I will not tell you I understand your misgivings, Shepard. The procedure is inherently risky. I can only say that since I have now experienced the freedom of my mobile frame, if it were me, trapped in the server as you are now, I would allow the procedure.”

“Will you be here with me, Edi? I think I’m going to need your support.”

“Of course, Shepard. I will do everything in my power to assist you. You have my word.”
Departures

A journey to the unknown shores needs a port, a ship, a wind; but more important than all of them: Courage; courage to leave the known for the unknown! — Mehmet Murat ildan

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**AOR** — Area of Responsibility

**Ferret** — Domesticated form of the European polecat, a mammal belonging to the same genus as the weasel. In the context of this story, it refers to Quinton Yang, a low-level Blue Suns member caught nosing around areas frequented by Zaeed Massani.

**XO** — Executive Officer – second in command of the vessel; answers to the ship’s captain.

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**SSV NORMANDY, DECK FIVE**

Zaeed Massani left the elevator as soon as the massive door segments retracted into the bulkheads; he strolled past the small arms modification bench and turned towards the port side, moving in the direction of the small area most recently occupied by Lieutenant Vega. He could see Sandra Patton’s back, where she stood at a small workbench. Saying, “Looks like we’ll ‘ave ter leave our business ashore unresolved until we return, eh?” as he came to a standstill on her right side.

Patton looked at him briefly, before returning her attention to the N7 Crusader she was modifying. “It is unfortunate, but duty calls. Scuttlebutt has it we’re going to hitch a ride inside one of the big Reapers, along with the *Hong Kong*. Don’t know the reason yet … Cap’n just said to make ready for departure.”

Zaeed sighed wistfully. “Kinda wish I ’ad accommodashuns ashore, Gunny … we almost ’ad a line on Solem Dal’Serah. Bet the Suns’ll slice dat miserable little ferret’s neck afore we get back.”

Patton snapped the last piece into the receiver, set the heavy gun down on the bench and gave her full attention to Massani. “Listen to me, Zaeed. We will pick up the trail when we return, whether Quinton Yang is still breathing or not. As for accommodations ashore for you? Not feasible … I can’t watch your back from this ship, and I cannot get off the ship unless it’s docked.”

Massani started to protest, saying, “Never needed anyone ter watch me back afore … don’t need …”

“ … enough, Zaeed!” Sandra eyes narrowed as she turned and took a step to stand right in front of the surprised merc. “You’d be lying dead in the fuckin’ dirt in the middle of Delta ward if I hadn’t been bird-doggin’ your ass yesterday.” Zaeed opened his mouth to protest, but the words died in his throat as Patton continued, “No! Let me finish. I told you after lunch the other day that I like you. Well, I like you a lot, and I’m not done finding out what it means to be good friends with you, Zaeed Massani … I’ll be damned if I’ll stand by and let you get killed by the Suns, or anybody else … you’re important to me, dammit!”

Zaeed was taken aback by the apparent depth of Sandra’s passion regarding him. “Never ’ad someone willin’ ter risk their ass on *my* behalf. Don’t know what ter say.”

“You don’t need to say anything, Zaeed. And as far as Dal’Serah is concerned, we’ll find him, okay? He can’t hide forever. Just get used to the idea you are going to have top cover anytime you’re out and about, and remember … it was *your* request to Cody that got *me* transferred to this ship.”
Zaeed grinned in spite of himself. “Damned if yew ain’t an in’erestin’ woman, Master Guns!”
Looking past her at the workbench, he asked, “Anythin’ I can do ter ’elp yew ’ere? Ain’t got nothin’ else ter keep me busy.”

Patton’s frown gradually turned to a small grin as he spoke. “Sure. Need to modify a few more guns to better kill synthetics … I’ll finish with the shotguns. You can use the other weapons bench, modify a number of the assault rifles. I don’t want any of our ground teams being injured by the metal bastards.”

Zaeed was standing so close to Patton he could smell her … the fragrance of her hair, mixed with that of oiled leather, gunsmithing lubricants and cleaner. He spent several moments after she finished speaking just … enjoying … the scent of the woman, before turning abruptly to stalk over to the other weapons bench, where he picked up a Striker assault rifle and began adding mods to enhance its operation. As he worked, he continued to think about the Master Gunnery Sergeant.

As Zaeed moved towards the main weapons configuration workbench, he walked right past Lieutenant James Vega as Vega, having entered the ship through the open hanger bay ramp, headed towards his former exercise location. Intent on clearing the last of his gear from the ship before it—and he—departed the Citadel, he walked up behind the master gunnery sergeant standing at the weapons bench where he had spent a lot of hours during the Reaper War. He cleared his throat to get her attention, hoping as he did so he wouldn’t startle her while she was working on the shotgun; she set the gun down and turned, half expecting Massani to be standing behind her once again. Upon seeing Vega—whom she hadn’t previously met—she straightened and said, “Lieutenant? …”

“It’s Vega, Master Guns … James Vega.” He held out a hand, which she took as he continued, “I’m just here to say my goodbyes to a few people, get the rest of my gear … Alliance is shipping me off to ‘N’ school couple of days from now; I heard Normandy is about to leave for parts unknown, so figured today would be my last chance.”

Glad to get her hand back uninjured after having it enveloped in Vega’s huge paw, she replied, “Good to meet you, Lieutenant. Congratulations on making ‘N’ school.”

“¡Gracias! While I’m here, I really need to thank Commander Shepard … she encouraged me to take the opportunity.”

Patton smiled as she activated her omnitool. After keying in a short sequence, she waved her arm towards the weapons bench where Zaeed was working and said, “There she is, Lieutenant. And, good luck to you. I hope you do well.”

Thanking her again, James turned and walked towards the weapons bench; saying hello to Massani as he walked past, he came up to Shepard’s projected image. “Commander? Seems my future in the Alliance truly began when I was assigned to be your guard for six months while the defense committee sat on their hands and did nothing to prepare for what was coming. I’ll be leaving for Earth in a couple of days … just wanted to thank you again for the dance when we first came on board.” James looked down for a moment before returning his gaze to Shepard. “I’m just glad you didn’t mop the deck with me the way Traynor did.”

“She’s still on deck two running deep-space comms and analyses, James. Be sure to stop by on your way out … I think she’d love to offer a ‘good luck’ to you.”

James grinned as he replied, “Thanks, Lola … I’ll be sure to do that. And good luck to you. Scuttlebutt has it there’s some strange shit going on in the Attican Traverse.” After all this time, it was still hard for James to accept that Rachael’s image was only that … he’d give anything to have
her available for another dance. “Here’s hoping I can actually give you a real hug next time I see you, Ma’am.”

Shepard grinned as she replied, “Much as it pains me to admit it, I’d like that, James … I’d like that a lot. You take care of yourself on Earth … do me and your crewmates proud down there.”

“I’ll do my best, Commander.” James watched as the image disappeared in a mini-tornado-like swirl of blue and red pixels before leaving to find his containers.

♦ CAPTAIN YUÁN’S QUARTERS · SSV HONG KONG II ♦

While Vega was clearing the rest of his gear from the Normandy, Major Alenko had come aboard the Hong Kong to say his farewells to Miranda Lawson. His first stop on board had been to see Captain Yuán in her quarters on the port side of Deck Two.

Xiùlán had sent a note to Miranda’s terminal on Deck One, requesting the specialist’s presence in her office. As Alenko had entered the ship through the hanger deck, Lawson wasn’t aware he was the reason she had been summoned to the captain’s office; her shock at seeing him was obvious as soon as the segmented hatch retracted into the bulkheads. “Major … ah, hello.” Turning her attention to her captain, she said, “You asked to see me, Ma’am?”

Xiùlán smiled, saying, “Come in, Specialist.” As Miranda walked into the office area, Yuán stood and came around her desk. “The major here has some information for you. I’m going to get a cup of tea, take a break for … oh, fifteen minutes or so.”

So saying, she walked past a stunned Miranda, leaving her alone with Alenko; Miri turned to face him as he walked up to her and placed his arms around her in a gentle embrace. She quickly reciprocated, pulling him in a lot tighter as she said, “I won’t break, Kaidan.” Pulling back just a bit, she looked deeply into his whiskey colored eyes for a moment before tilting her head to tentatively place her lips on his; he responded by tightening his arms around her torso and deepening the kiss, giving in to the passion she was sharing with his mouth on his.

Breaking the kiss to take a breath, Miranda whispered, “I didn’t think we’d have another chance to talk before you left.” She placed a little kiss on his mouth and continued, “We’re shipping out, Kaidan … probably in the morning.” Another little kiss. “I don’t know how long we’ll be out there, and you’re going to leave for Grissom Academy. It’ll be a while …” another kiss, “… before we see each other again.”

Miri’s kisses were working their magic on Kaidan … unlike the night of their dinner date, he made no attempt to hide his arousal by lessening the tightness of his embrace; rather, he slowly slid one hand from the middle of her back to the middle of her butt and pressed hard, forcing her hips harder against his own.

“My God, Kaidan … really?” She responded by grinding her hips against him for a few moments before reluctantly backing away. She couldn’t move far with his hand massaging her ass, but knew if she didn’t stop herself … and Kaidan, they’d wind up using Xiùlán’s bed to satisfy their mutual lust. There just wasn’t enough time.

“Captain’s issued a crew recall, Kaidan … I can’t get off the ship now, not even for a few hours.”

Kaidan finally found his voice, croaking out, “Damn! Just my luck … find a gorgeous woman that seems willing to make love to me, and she has to leave with neither of us satisfied. Too bad there isn’t someplace on the ship …”
Miranda smirked and replied, “Just have to wait for a while longer, Luv … that is, if you think I’m worth waiting for.”

Kaidan reached in and kissed her again. “Are you kidding me? I don’t want to wait, but I definitely think you’re worth it, no matter how long it takes.” Taking one last, lingering kiss, he reluctantly released her and stepped back, just as a signal from the entrance hatch sounded, indicating Yuán’s return to her office was imminent.

Miranda placed both hands on Kaidan’s cheeks and lightly kissed him as the hatch sections parted and retracted into the bulkheads to admit the ship’s captain. Pretending not to notice Miranda’s goodbye kiss, she walked around her desk, sat down with her cup of tea and said, “Major? Looks like you two are saying your goodbyes.”

“I’m afraid so, Captain. I’ll be leaving for Grissom Academy in a couple of days … Don’t know when I’ll be back,” Kaidan responded. “And I’m told the Hong Kong’s leaving for a different part of the galaxy … no telling when we’ll see each other again.”

After taking a sip of tea, Xiùlán smiled up at Miranda as she said, “You may return to your duties, Ms Lawson … that is, if Mr Alenko is done speaking with you …” She looked from one to the other, waiting for confirmation.

Miranda’s “Aye, Ma’am,” was spoken with less enthusiasm than Xiùlán had come to expect, not that she really faulted the specialist for feeling that way. Miranda turned for a moment at the door to look longingly at the major before continuing on, heading for the semi-circular staircase to Deck One.

Xiùlán looked at Major Alenko as she sipped from her mug. “Major, I’m sensing a growing attraction between you and my comms specialist … and it’s obvious she’s quite taken with you.” Kaidan started to protest, only to be waved off. “Personally, I think it’s probably the best medicine for her … make her realize her misadventures at the hands of the Blue Suns didn’t make her undesirable. It would seem she’s grown to trust you, Alenko. For her to again place trust in a man is … remarkable, and I just wanted to thank you for understanding.”

“I only wish things had worked out differently. If she hadn’t joined the Navy, she’d be free to join me at Grissom.” Alenko thought for a few moments before concluding, “I am grateful that you took such an interest in her after rescuing her from those bastards in Vancouver, Captain … I think you have done more to heal her psyche than an entire squad of shrinks could have ever accomplished.”

Xiùlán finished her tea before responding. “That’s high praise, Major … but I can’t take all the credit … Miranda has more mental fortitude than you know; she’s still healing, and you’ve played a part in that. She’s going to be just fine.”

Alenko grinned. “I’m glad you’re so optimistic, Captain.” Taking a peek at the chrono on the wall beside her desk, he said, “Looks like it’s time for me to leave you … let you get back to business. I have to pay a quick visit to the Normandy, say my farewells to a few people on board.” Offering his right hand, he finished with, “Safe flight, Captain Yuán. As they used to say, ‘May you encounter only fair winds and following seas’.”

Xiùlán stood and reached across her desk to take his hand. “Thank you, Major. I hope your assignment at Grissom Academy proves to be a positive experience, although I cannot imagine cleaning up after an assault by Cerberus will be easy.”

Alenko chuckled. “I expect I’ll have my work cut out for me, Captain, but it’ll be good to be working again. Until next time.” With that, Kaidan turned and left Xiùlán’s office.
Samantha Traynor was busy collating the data sent by Liara T’Soni regarding the various Cerberus created deep—space stations she and Garrus Vakarian had encountered in the Horse Head Nebula; she had also been tasked with plotting the routes Normandy and the Hong Kong would be taking once both ships were free in space after their trip aboard the Repository Žiuk’Durmah.

Sammy’s concentration on her task was so intense she didn’t notice the elevator door segments retracting into the bulkheads, so nearly jumped out of her skin when a voice, seemingly from right behind her said, “Hey, Especialista … How’ve you been?”

In spite of her surprise, Traynor quickly locked her terminal and spun about, seemingly in one smooth, uninterrupted motion; she was smiling as she turned, as no one had ever called her ‘Especialista’ except Lieutenant Vega. “Dammit, Lieutenant! You shouldn’t be sneaking up on people,” she laughed, “especially people that can plant your ass on the ground!”

James raised his hands, palms outward as he grinned back at her. “Sorry if I startled you, Ms Traynor. I just came by to say adiós and Buena suerte … that’s good luck.” James lowered his hands, offering his right hand for her to take as he did so. “I can’t say it’s always been a pleasure to serve with you, Samantha,” he said in a low voice, “especially when you cleaned the hanger deck with me; I’m just glad you and I can part as comrades, maybe even as amigos.”

Traynor swallowed hard. She had virtually forgotten about their little dust-up in the hanger bay—seemed like something from a distant time, long ago. Clearing her throat, she spoke softly: “Yes, I meant what I said the day after our dance in the hanger … about you losing your juvenile attitude regarding women? Remember? I really hope you’ve grown as a man since then … I truly want to see you do well in that school.”

James nodded his head as he thought back to that day in the Crew’s Mess. “No worries there, Specialist. I learned my lesson, and I am grateful you talked Shepard and Alenko out of demoting me.” Vega grimaced at the memory, then smiled at Traynor as he said, “I’m going to make N7, Traynor … count on it.” He wanted to give her a hug, but something in the tone of her voice told him he hadn’t been totally forgiven for his behavior back then. He gently squeezed the hand he was still holding as he nodded and said, “So long, Chief Warrant Officer Traynor. I look forward to seeing you when I graduate.”

Noting his use of ‘when’ instead of ‘after’, Traynor nodded as she replied, “If that’s an invitation, you can count on it.” Traynor grinned at the big man as she continued, “I’ll try to get shore leave to attend the ceremony … I’d like to be the first to buy you a congratulatory beer.”

James nodded as he released her hand; he had started to walk past the galaxy map when he turned back towards her. “If you don’t mind, would you give my regards to Engineer Daniels, and tell her my heavy bag is all hers … I seriously doubt I’ll need it for the school, and she can punch and kick hell out of it to her heart’s content.”

“I’ll be sure to do that, Lieutenant,” came the smiling reply. “May even get some use out of it myself.”

James nodded again as he turned and started walking towards the ship’s bridge, intent on saying his goodbyes to Joker and Edi.

Traynor watched his retreating back for a few seconds as he walked through the tactical passageway; with a heavy sigh, she logged back into her terminal and resumed her task.
While James Vega was saying his goodbyes to Specialist Traynor on Deck Two, Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez was meeting with Gabby Daniels in the office he was now sharing with Greg Adams. “Senior Chief Petty Officer Daniels, as I’ve said before, you are now completely in charge of the Normandy’s propulsion systems. As you will no longer be sharing working quarters with Engineer Donnelly, we have some help for you.”

Gabby’s eyes went wide at that revelation. “I thought Mr Donnelly would still be working in engineering,” she said. “It’s none of my business, Sir, but has he been demoted?”

“Demoted? No, Gabby, Mr Donnelly has been assigned to operate and maintain Normandy’s environmental and internal power systems. His new station is one of two terminals in the tactical passageway on Deck Two.”

“And Lieutenant Commander Adams is obviously not going to be in engineering any longer …” Face clouded in conflicting emotions, she asked, “… so, I won’t be by myself down there? You transferred some people in to assist? …”

“… I did.” Cortez looked at a data pad he was holding. “Petty Officer First Class Samuel Davison and Petty Officers Second Class Félicité Collins and Midori Yamashiro. All three come highly recommended.” Steve looked up from his datapad. “Exploit their knowledge and talents, Ms Daniels. I want to see you apply your skills to overseeing operations and performing the fine-tuning of the systems you didn’t have the time or energy for previously.”

Gabby was feeling a bit overwhelmed. “That’s … going to take some getting used to, Sir. It seems I’ve always done everything down there.”

“You’re correct … Normandy was understaffed, from my first day aboard.” Steve shook his head as he continued, “Looking back, I wonder how we even managed to survive the entire war. Anyway, you’re the Senior Chief Petty Officer, so feel free to assign the three of them as you see fit … I’d even expect you to have them on different shifts so you’re covered 24/7. Additionally, Collins and Yamashiro will be assigned to cover for our two HVAC engineers when one or the other has a day off—rotating schedule, so no one gets burned out—we’re not at war, so we can spread the assignments around a bit.”

Steve activated the terminal on his desk; Gabby’s omnitool lit in response. “There’s their bios, their work history. Once you’ve met with them and had a chance to get to know them, you can have Davison assign duties to Collins and Yamashiro. Get used to having the extra help so you can reevaluate how the systems are running, then fine tune their jobs a bit. Davison will report to you, you report to me. Let me know if you have any problems.”

Gabby had the feeling she had just been dismissed, so stood as she said, “Aye-aye, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Cortez called out as she turned to leave. “You’re welcome, Ms Daniels.”

James Vega, carrying a large transfer bag filled with the last of the personal items he had left on the Normandy, paused at the open outer airlock hatch after saying his farewells to Joker and Edi; the pair had been busy checking and rechecking systems as they prepared for departure, but had taken the time to offer their congratulations on his acceptance to the Alliance’s ICT program. Edi had surprised him with a hug, strong enough to make him think she’d possibly bruised his ribs. It had come as a total shock to him that her curvaceous ‘platform’ felt every bit as real as any human
woman he’d ever been pressed up against. Even more surprising was the kiss she had bestowed on him … her lips were warm and soft, just as if they really were flesh and blood and not some synthetic product from a Cerberus laboratory.

As he stepped out of the ship, he nearly bumped into Doctor Karin Chakwas, herself carrying a large transfer bag and a smaller, black bag that looked suspiciously like the ones he’d seen country doctors carry back on Earth. Upon recognizing the walking mountain that had nearly run into her, she set her transfer bag down, saying, “Lieutenant? It’s good to see you … but it looks as if you’re on your way to your next assignment. Heading out for the ‘villa’?”

“Yes Ma’am,” came the smiling response. “Glad I ran into you … just saying farewell to my crewmates before the Normandy takes off.”

Karin extended her right hand, which James took as she said, “I won’t keep you … I’m just returning to the ship from Huerta Memorial.” With a sigh of relief, she added, “It’ll be good to be in space again on the Normandy.” Fixing him with a serious look, she drew close while still hanging on to his hand. “Have a safe trip, James. Stay in touch … let us know how you’re surviving while you’re slogging around in the jungles there.”

“Thank you, Doc … I’ll do that. And good luck to you.”

♦ XO’s OFFICE, DECK THREE ♦

Steve Cortez was just finishing his report, an update of the personnel files concerning Chief Petty Officer Gabriella Daniels and Petty Officer First Class Kenneth Donnelly, when Greg Adams strolled in to take a seat at his own desk. “You talk to Daniels about her assignment, Steve?”

“Just finished our meeting,” came the response. “Shocked the hell out of her that Donnelly would no longer be working with her. Surprised her even more that she’ll have three people under her immediate command.”

Adams chuckled as he shook his head. “Gabby is the perfect fit for head of the propulsion department on this ship. She knows theory better than most physicists I’ve met. Now we’ll get to see if her engineering smarts can be used for organizing the people working under her.”

Steve asked, “Have you spoken to Donnelly concerning his change in department?”

“Going to in a few minutes … actually sent word I needed to see him in here.”

Cortez nodded as he responded, “I heard he went straight to the captain concerning his marriage proposal to Daniels … is reassigning him part of that?”

“It is,” Adams said. “Only way I know to keep them serving on the same ship once they’re married … Truthfully, they’re both a distraction for each other. I’m betting she’ll do a much better job without him in the same department … and maybe his performance will improve as well.” Greg rubbed his chin as he thought about the two engineers. “I’m afraid sleeping facilities are going to be problematic, but I expect we can work it out in some manner. Those two will be the first couple on board the Normandy, not counting the commander and Dr T’Soni.”

“Okay then …” Cortez replied, rising from his desk. “I have to go check-in with Master Guns Patton, see how she’s doing with the small arms modifications.” Steve ran a hand across the top of his head as he continued, “Also have to see Lieutenant Morse, maybe even over lunch … get a status update on the provisions being brought aboard.” Steve moved to the exit and stood aside as it
opened to reveal a nervous Ken Donnelly approaching for his meeting with the ship’s executive officer.

“Come on in, Donnelly … Adams is expecting you.”

“Yessir … Thank you, Sir,” came the reply; Ken nodded as he walked past Cortez. As Donnelly approached the XO’s desk, Greg waved him to an adjacent chair.

“Mr Donnelly … I wanted to speak with you about your decision to marry the Normandy’s chief propulsion engineer.”

Donnelly was sure his heart was about to stop cold as he watched Adams fiddling with a datapad … thinking, sure as death, he gonna transfer me offen Normandy! “As ah tellt th’ Captain, Sir … it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Greg looked up at the young man. “But it is a problem, don’t you see? Having you working in the same area as your soon-to-be-wife … never mind that she’s your superior officer, just isn’t going to work for me, Commander Cortez, or Ms Daniels, so here’s what I’m going to do. There are three consoles in the tactical passageway up on Deck Two, one of which is the master control for the environmental systems for the entire ship.”

“Yessir … ah ken whaur they’re located … hud tae uise yin or th’ ither oan occasion.” Kenneth was beginning to realize that Adams, despite his cool attitude towards him, was about to propose a solution that would enable him to stay aboard the Normandy.

“Donnelly, I’m placing you in charge of the ship’s environmental systems. Your assigned station will be the master control console I just mentioned. You’ll have an assistant, Petty Officer Second Class Janine Ramsey … she’ll be performing some of the repairs and maintenance of the systems, under your direction, but …” Greg studied the petty officer carefully as he continued in a somber tone, “… she’s not to be ill-treated or talked down to. I’ve overheard some of your conversations with Ms Daniels regarding other women on this ship; I expect you to treat Ms Ramsey with the utmost respect at all times. I get any negative feedback from her or Ms Daniels concerning your dealings with her, I’ll boot you off the Normandy at whatever port happens to be close, even if it’s Omega Station. Are we clear?”

“Perfectly, Sur. There’ll be na problems, sur.”

“Good to hear.” Holding up a datapad, Greg added, “This is the maintenance manual for the HVAC systems on this ship. I recommend you download it to your omnitool so you have it readily available. Give the datapad to Ms Ramsey when you meet with her … she should already be aboard. She can bring it back to me when she’s done.”

Donnelly couldn’t wait to go tell Gabby he’d be staying aboard the ship. “Is that a', Sur?”

“Not quite … I expect there will be ten hours a day when both of you off duty, so I want you and Ramsey working overlapping shifts, with an ‘on-call’ schedule; that way, either of you can roll out of your rack to repair or replace whatever piece of critical equipment breaks down during the third shift. We’ll rotate on-call so neither one of you gets used up, and I plan on assigning Petty Officers Second Class Félicité Collins and Midori Yamashiro to alternately cover for whichever of you has a day off. Sound fair to you?”

“Yessir. We’ll mak’ it wirk, Sur.”

“Good to hear,” Greg replied. “Dismissed, Donnelly.”
Captain Yuán Xiùlán trotted up the semi-circular stairway to Deck One; ignoring the galaxy map, she walked around the projection well on its starboard side, nodding to Staff Lieutenant Cross as she passed him. She strode through the tactical passageway, stopping only when she reached the bridge.

Placing her hands on the top of the backrests, left hand on Flight Lieutenant Gordon Spencer’s seat, right hand on Flight Lieutenant JG Wendy Hall’s, she surveyed the nearly incomprehensible mass of electronic displays and haptic interfaces surrounding the pair as she spoke: “Wendy, open a comm channel to Captain Cody on the Normandy.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

After a brief pause, Cody’s voice came over the speaker in the overhead. “Captain Yuán. You and your crew ready for a trip to the Horsehead Nebula?”

Xiùlán smiled as she responded, “Crew’s all aboard, fuel and supplies have been loaded. I actually haven’t told anyone where we’re going, Captain. Are you going to ride inside Harbinger?”

“Don’t see a faster way to get there, do you?”

Xiùlán’s smile did not reach her eyes. “I believe the Pax relay is in working order, Sir, and it’s a straight shot from here. If Harbinger or Žiuk’Durmah don’t trust it, we can use them as carriers. Are you ready for departure?”

Cody chuckled. “All our supplies have been loaded, crew members are aboard, assignments have been taken care of. Just making a few final adjustments, but you say the word, we’ll follow you out to the relay.”

“Okay then … here’s hoping we have a safe flight. Hong Kong out.” Wendy terminated the connection as her captain looked down, first at Spencer, then at Hall. “Flight Lieutenants, you know the drill … start the APUs; after the dock workers have shore power disconnected and power cables clear, close the hanger bay ramp and seal the ship. Light the burners under the eezo core and power up the engines at your discretion. We’re going on a little expedition.”

Gordon and Wendy were an efficient pair; in less than fifteen minutes, the slight vibration in the deckplates indicated the three APUs were running. The overhead lights flickered ever so slightly as the dock based power couplings were disconnected, while the nearly subliminal purr echoing through the inner hull spoke to the rapidly increasing power output of the eezo fueled mass effect core.

After running through their cold-start, warm-up and pre-flight checklists together, Lieutenant Hall contacted Alliance docking control for clearance to ‘pushback’ and a vector for the Mass Relay.

“Hong Kong, Docking Control: you are cleared for departure on vector 082.71.260; Exercise caution when passing the Reaper destroyer circling near your position.”

“Docking Control, Hong Kong,” Wendy responded. “Cleared for departure, vector 082.71.260; position of Repository noted—he will be following us to the Relay. Hong Kong out.”

After a quick look up and back at her captain, Wendy turned her attention to Gordon and said, “We’re good to go, Mr Spencer. Let’s take her out.”

Spencer activated several controls in sequence: he decreased the apparent mass of the ship to the point it was virtually floating, after which he had the dock VI release all the docking clamps and
retract the swingout arms from over the thruster pod support spars and under the nose. Speaking to Wendy, he said, “Bow thrusters, five second burn.”

As she applied thrust that amounted to only a few kilograms for the requested duration, the ship slowly started moving away from the docks. Spencer began swinging the bow around as soon as the forward viewport deflectors cleared the station’s kinetic barrier.

Xiùlán, still standing between the flight lieutenants, quietly spoke to the air around her. “Asharru. Are you monitoring the Hong Kong?”

_This one is prepared to follow Hong Kong-frigate._

“Thank you. Destination is the Horse head Nebula,” Xiùlán said quietly. “Please confirm the receiving relay there has been repaired and is operating correctly.”

_I will do as you request, Yuán-Captain, _came the reply. _Please stand by._

Xiùlán grinned at Asharru’s answer. _Had anyone ever sent a request to any Reaper during the war? Wonder what the reply would have been then? _»Sure, puny human! Just sit tight, we’ll be right there! Once we indoctrinate you, you’ll do whatever we say!« I can just see someone trying to explain that line of thinking to the admiral._

Her quiet chuckle drew Wendy’s attention. “Anything you care to share, Ma’am?”

Xiùlán’s grin faded as she looked at her co-pilot. “Not really, Ms Hall … just some random, idle thoughts concerning our large synthetic friends out there.”

She started to say more, but was interrupted by Asharru. _Harbinger and Esiz’Qür confirm the receiving relay in Horse Head is operating to specifications and is ready to receive Hong Kong-frigate and Normandy-frigate._

“Thank you, Asharru. Will they inform Cody on the Normandy?”

_Harbinger is currently speaking with Cody-Captain._

Turning to look at Spencer’s shoulder, she said, “Okay, Flight Lieutenant, set course for the Horse head Nebula. We’ll take the relays for this trip.” Without waiting for an acknowledgement, Xiùlán turned and headed for the CIC, saying over her shoulder, “Let Lieutenant Cross know when we reach Widow, and tell me when we reach our destination.” Spencer replied, “Aye, Ma’am,” as he began sliding haptic interfaces back and forth; the _Hong Kong_ responded like the thoroughbred she was, accelerating smoothly through the constantly shifting traffic around the Citadel and the relay.

As Xiùlán drew even with Miranda’s post in the CIC, she said, “Ms Lawson, send a message to Captain Cody on the Normandy … give him my regards and inform him the receiving relay in Horse head is functional, so we won’t need to ride Repositories to get there. Then contact Harbinger and Žiuk’Durman, make sure they’re coming along for the ride, especially Harbinger.”

“Yes, Ma’am,”

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♦ **MASS RELAY, PAX SYSTEM · HORSE HEAD NEBULA ♦**

Only recently repaired by a cadre of former Reapers, the unnamed Relay in orbit about Pax began to reorient itself from an Annos Basin vector to a Widow Relay pairing as the colossal gyroscopic rings
slowly began increasing their rotational velocity from a languid twenty RPM to an impressive sixty-five RPM; the near blinding blue-white element zero core brightened in lockstep with the increasing rotation speed of the rings, until a flashing discharge of power arced into the distance, reaching for and enveloping an Alliance frigate in shifting blue-to-purple colored sheets of dark energy.

As the frigate slowed to sublight velocity and banked away from the relay, the energy sheets flashed out to envelope a more sinister shape; that of an old machine … a destroyer class Reaper, which banked and turned to follow the frigate.

The frigate’s captain called to the Reaper destroyer: “Asharru. Set your course for Lazarus Station and standby for the arrival of our other companions … home in on the tight beam signal from Iringù-Ebizkur. I’m going to notify Garrus and Liara we’re nearby.”

_As you wish, Yuán-Captain._

The gyroscopic rings continued their high-speed revolutions, indicating another arrival from the Widow System. In seconds, another old machine, this one much larger than the first, decelerated from FTL as it drew even with the relay, wreathed in waves of energy fueled by the charged eezo core within the rings. A third Reaper appeared, this time escorted by another, somewhat larger Alliance frigate. These last two arrivals immediately joined the earlier arrivals, coming to a flanking position near the first Nazara class Reaper as the blinding glow diminished and the rotational speed of the rings returned to their slow pace.

“Connection established, Captain Yuán,” Specialist Lawson reported. “Dr T’Soni standing by.”

“Patch the feed into the conference room, Ms Lawson, then contact _Normandy_, let them know we’ll be departing for the Lazarus Research Station in a few minutes.” Xiùlán left the galaxy map platform and hurriedly walked around the partition bulkhead to the short ramp into the _Hong Kong’s_ main communications area. Taking a seat, she activated the viewscreen and said, “Dr. T’Soni … Garrus … How are you doing?”

“All things considered, we’re doing okay. It’s ‘captain’ now, is it not?” As Xiùlán was responding, Staff Lieutenant Cross’s voice came through her ear mounted comm. “_Normandy_ standing by, Captain. Should I initiate the jump for Lazarus?”

“It is … hang on just a moment, please.” Activating her personal comm, she replied to Cross: “Make the jump, Mr Cross.” Returning her attention to the view screen, she answered T’Soni’s question. “_Captain_ is correct.” Feeling the subtle shudder in the decking beneath her boots, she added, “We just initiated the jump, heading for your location. _Normandy_ is with us, as is Harbinger, Žiuk’Durmah and Asharru … that’s a destroyer we found damaged and abandoned on Luna. I think he’s adopted the _Hong Kong_ … follows us around like an overgrown puppy.”

“Is Miranda Lawson with you, Captain?”

“She is … in addition to her knowledge of everything concerning the Lazarus Cell, she’s my comms and analysis specialist … oh, and Dr Chakwas is still on board _Normandy_.” Xiùlán paused, then asked, “Have you returned to the cryo storage facility since we spoke last?”

“We have not … We didn’t see what more we could gain by going down there. Garrus made some repairs in the station’s hanger bay … should have no trouble getting a shuttle in there.”

Xiùlán nodded as she responded, “Sounds good. We’ll contact you when we arrive … should be about three hours, maybe less.”
“Thank you, Captain. I am looking forward to talking to Rachaél on the Normandy.”
Arrivals
Chapter by Old Gamer

I have a sense that we have not yet arrived, that we are still reaching. For each other. For who we are meant to be. — Ally Condie, Crossed

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_Ferret_ — domesticated form of the European polecat, a mammal belonging to the same genus as the weasel. In the context of this story, it refers to Quinton Yang, a low-level Blue Suns member caught nosing around areas frequented by Zaeed Massani.

_XO_ — Executive Officer – second in command of the vessel; answers to the ship’s captain.

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★ ABOARD IRINGÙ-ËfíZKUR, DOCKED AT LAZARUS RESEARCH STATION ★

Liara T’Soni terminated the connection to the _Hong Kong_ and turned towards her turian companion. “Three hours, Garrus … maybe a little less.”

“So I heard. Seems like we’ve been out here by ourselves forever. It’ll be nice to see all our friends again. Are you looking forward to seeing Miranda?”

“I haven’t thought too much about it,” she replied. “I’m more interested in speaking with Rachaël again … perhaps …” Liara paused, looking down as her cheeks flushed slightly, “… having EDI facilitate a joining, before an attempt is made to unite her consciousness with one of the clones in storage below.”

Garrus eyes sparkled with understanding. “You’re afraid she may not survive the transfer procedure.” A statement, not a question.

Liara’s attempt at a smile came across as a grimace. “Is it that obvious, Garrus?” Liara paused for several long moments and stared at the deck, a myriad of emotions running rampant through her head, all of them causing her heart to physically ache. She took a deep breath to calm the flutter in her chest and finally looked back to her turian friend. “Yes, I suppose it probably is … the thought has crossed my mind that this attempt to bring Rachaël back from death’s door may be doomed to failure.” Unable to stop herself, Liara began to pace about the small space near her terminal. “I have the utmost faith in Miranda’s abilities, Garrus. You didn’t see the horrific condition of Rachaël's body when I turned her over to Cerberus. Miranda pulled off a miracle, bringing Rachaël back to life over the course of those two years, when everyone else—even the Alliance—gave up on her … just accepted her death as an unfortunate result of the _Normandy_’s encounter with the Collectors.”

The sub-harmonics of the turian’s reply came through distinctly. “Don’t forget that Operative Lawson had virtually unlimited resources available to her … The Illusive Man damned near broke the bank financing her reconstruction; Miranda doesn’t have that luxury this time.”

“A fact of which I am painfully aware; but Miranda’s advantage this time will be having a cloned body ready and waiting. I sincerely hope _that_—plus the participation of Harbinger—will make all the difference.”

“And I share that hope right along with you, Liara.”
The asari stopped her pacing and sat down with a heavy, desperate sigh as she replied in a shaky voice, “I really cannot picture a ‘happy ever after’ for those of us that managed to survive the Reaper War if Rachaél isn’t included.” She looked up at Garrus as tears started to trickle down her cheeks. “That would be the ultimate insult, Garrus … to her, and to us.”

♦ ELYSIUM, VETUS SYSTEM · PETRA NEBULA ♦

The MSV Crystal Lance, having left the Widow system after a brief stopover in the Sol System, slowed rapidly to sub-light velocity beside the Mass Relay and changed course, heading for the planet Elysium, there to land, drop off a few passengers—all civilian technical experts sent to augment the colony’s reconstruction teams—and to pick up a new load of passengers, also mostly civilians, for the short trip to Jon Grissom Academy, the remains of which were in orbit above the city.

Once the Crystal Lance touched down at the spaceport on the outskirts of Illyria, a dark-haired human male left the ship alongside several other people. Kaidan Alenko had come here, at the behest of Admiral Steven Hackett, to meet with and persuade, if possible, a woman—still recuperating from injuries received during the final battle for Earth—to return to her previous position aboard the space station. Alenko walked the short distance to a kiosk offering transportation rentals, swiped his military credit chit through the reader and entered an X3M speeder.

After keying in the destination, Kaidan sat back as the small machine rose from its parking spot, spun about on its axis and headed off for the outskirts of the colony’s capitol city; he hoped the destruction wrought by the Reapers hadn’t reached into the scarcely settled countryside. Reports received by the personnel department had indicated the subject of his search was staying in an old house once lived in by Jon Grissom; Kaidan could only hope that the reports were accurate. He had sent her an Extranet message requesting she return to the station, but had not received an answer; if he didn’t find her living at the Grissom estate, he didn’t have another viable location in which to search.

It was only a few minutes before he caught sight of the house; as he drew closer, his apprehension grew. The house was still standing, but an entire corner had been blasted. The resulting fire had weakened the structural steel frame, causing the corner to collapse in on itself. Kaidan could only hope that the living area was still intact and the woman he was searching for was alive and well.

The aircar’s preprogramed flight path brought the vehicle around in a circle as it dropped in altitude to gently settle in the parking area near the front of the house. From this vantage point, the damage Kaidan had witnessed from the air was invisible, raising his hopes considerably. Programming the aircar to wait, Kaidan got out and slowly walked towards the main entrance.

He was within ten meters of the door when it slid open slightly, revealing the disturbing sight of a gun barrel being pushed through the gap; it was pointed more or less in his direction, and the harsh voice that accompanied it, while sounding feminine, was definitely not friendly. “Unless you wish to become varren food, you’d better turn your ass around, return to that aircar and get the hell out of here, now!”

At the first sight of the gun barrel, Kaidan had stopped walking and spread his arms out from his sides. “My name is Alenko … Major, Kaidan Alenko … I’m here to meet Kahlee Sanders. If you’re not her and she isn’t here, perhaps you can tell me where …”

The deafening report from the gun interrupted him, the dirt kicked up by the round falling on his boots and dusting his pants legs. Kaidan stood his ground and waited, counted to three in his head, then continued as if nothing had happened. “… I can find her. Killing me accomplishes nothing for you … I expect it would even make your position here untenable.”
The gun barrel never wavered … the voice behind it holding firm. “I want you gone from here, understand?”

Alenko decided he’d had enough. With only the slightest movement, he used his left hand to generate a biotic pull, snatching the pistol from the unseen woman’s hand; this he caught as it flew towards him. Using his other hand, he generated a biotic throw, aimed to strike the door at an angle. The door reacted by retracting completely out of the way, leaving the woman behind it without cover.

Pale blue eyes studied Alenko as she waited to see what he would do; after what felt like forever to Kaidan, she slowly walked through the open doorway. Stopping a few meters in front of him, she grunted, “I’m Sanders. Let’s say I believe you’re an Alliance major and not some damned merc … of what possible use can I be to you, unless …” Apparently coming to a decision, she said, “We need to get inside” She turned and started back for her still open door, expecting him to follow.

As Kaidan followed along behind her, he asked, “What were you getting ready to say about being of use to me?”

“Inside, door closed, music on loud. There are listeners everywhere. I didn’t used to be so paranoid, but dealing with Cerberus and the Spectres taught me to be suspicious … of everyone and everything.” Glancing over her shoulder at Alenko, she continued, “Hell, for all I know you could be Cerberus … or a member of the Spectres, or both.”

Kaidan decided to keep his Spectre affiliation to himself, at least until she could explain her actions. He followed her into the undamaged portion of the house, which featured a kitchen/dining area, a small lounge, a bathroom and a bedroom.

“Over there,” she pointed to a chair by the table. “Sit … I’ll be right back.”

Alenko did as directed, looking around the room as he did so. A framed photo on a shelf caught his eye as Kahlee returned, now accompanied by loud music suitable to a nightclub. She set a bottle and two glasses on the table, poured two fingers of amber-colored liquid into each glass and said, “Drink up. Not many visitors out here, especially after the Reapers.” Returning to the last question asked of her, she said, “You’re looking to restart that damned biotic school up on Grissom Academy, right? That’s why you’re down here risking life and limb … You think you can get me to go back up to that station.”

“You’re still Alliance, correct? I’m just guessing here, but I think you have probably used all your accrued leave as well as your injury recovery time … am I close?” He smiled cautiously as he watched her take a careful sip from her glass. “You’ve been here damn near six months. I can see there was some pretty major destruction, but the damages here look pretty recent.”

“Lots of bad stuff happened after the Reapers got through wrecking Elysium … scavenger merces, mostly batarian, but humans also, coming through, looking to steal what little was left. Been trying to protect what’s mine ever since I arrived. My physical injuries healed rather quickly … mental injuries? Not so well.”

“Kahlee, I’m not here to force you to go with me up to Grissom. Admiral Hackett has transferred me off the Normandy … appointed me Chief of Staff for the school.”

Surprised by this, she asked, “You were on the Normandy during the war … with Commander Shepard?”

“I was. I wasn’t part of the ground team that got your biotic students off the station, but I read the
mission report … and I don’t blame you one iota for not wanting anything to do with Cerberus. We engaged their forces a helluva lot more than we did the Reapers.”

“I hadn’t planned on going back out there, Alenko. I don’t even know if I’m still capable. And what the hell do you think you can do with a ruined space station?”

“The plan is to repair the damages caused by Cerberus and the Reapers and restart the biotics program. Hackett told me …” Kaidan hesitated as he thought back to the meeting aboard the Normandy. Looking at Sanders, he thought about the best way to say what needed to be said, then, “… he told me you were having a rough time dealing with the loss of Admiral Anderson.”

Kahlee brought a hand up to her mouth as she looked away. Kaidan remained silent, studying her profile, the brilliant sunlight entering through the small window back-lighting her hair like a halo. After several minutes of waiting to see if she would continue speaking with him, she finally rewarded his patience by turning her head back towards him; there was a glint of steel in her eyes as she glared at him and ground out, “David Anderson was the finest example of a human being I have ever known. After all the shit he had to deal with … we had to deal with … to lose him in the last few hours of the conflict is nearly too much to accept.” She knocked back the rest of her drink and poured some more from the bottle.

“He died a hero, Kahlee, and I know those words sound hollow … really of no comfort whatsoever to you. All I can say is while we mourn his death, we can be glad he lived … you can be glad he lived, and that he cared for you. Would he want to see you hiding in this ruined house, wallowing in self-pity?”

Kaidan’s words were like a slap to the face for Kahlee; she was still not ready to let Anderson go. When she finally found her voice again, she said, “This house is all I have left, Alenko. It’s half-wrecked, but it’s mine. There are one or two good memories here … along with many that are not so good.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“I was a lieutenant at the time, over twenty years ago … came here from the Alliance research facility on Sidon just before everyone there was killed and the base destroyed; I was looking for help from … my father. Instead, I brought him a whole bunch of trouble he didn’t need, including a krogan bounty hunter and a human-hating turian Spectre named Saren Arterius, along with an Alliance lieutenant … David Anderson.”

Alenko’s interest was piqued—he had heard of Sidon—that the facility was involved in illegal AI research. “What was your job there?”

“Computer systems tech … working on Dr Shu Qian’s team. He was studying an unknown artifact … something discovered near geth space. Dr. Qian’s behavior became more irrational as time went by, so I decided to report him. I downloaded copies of the data and all of Qian's research records, forged myself a pass by hacking restricted security files, and traveled here.” Finishing her second drink, she set the glass on the table next to the bottle; deciding against pouring another, she finished with, “So, you seem like a bright fellow; what do you think Dr Qian’s obsession was?”

Kaidan had heard enough to make a guess. “Sounds like Qian was indoctrinated … by Sovereign. I didn’t know Arterius was involved at that time, but it makes sense now.”

“Saren damn near got Anderson and me killed in the refinery explosion he caused,” she said quietly. “We parted ways after that … Alliance promoted me, transferred me to a classified posting.”
“Explains your dislike of Spectres,” Alenko offered. “You do realize that Commander Shepard was a Spectre as well, right?”

She whirled to face him, a trace of loathing in her eyes. “Shepard was the complete opposite of Saren, and now she’s dead as well!”

“I agree with you, Kahlee. If I hadn’t promised Hackett I’d stop by, I wouldn’t have bothered you. I came here to see if you were ready to return to the station, start working on restarting the Ascension Project. I could use your knowledge … your experience, but if you’re not interested …”

“I think you’d better leave now, Major. We have nothing more to discuss.” Kahlee poured herself a third drink, which she downed in one swallow.

Alenko sighed as he slowly got to his feet. Saying, “I’ll just show myself out,” he unhurriedly walked to the front of the house, where he set her pistol on a side table before leaving through the front door. ‘Don’t think I’ll get any medals for my skills as a negotiator,’ he thought as he walked back to the aircar. ‘Looks like she’s going to simply retire and live in this wrecked house. What a damned shame.’

LaLazarus Research Station

Liara and Garrus watched and waited as a pair of UT-47a shuttles eased through the massive kinetic barrier guarding the hanger bay; each pivoted on its axis to face the way it had entered before settling to the decking accompanied by the steadily decreasing whine of engines. The near-side access hatch on the shuttle from the Hong Kong opened to reveal a number of people within; Miranda Lawson stepped out first, followed by Doctor Karin Chakwas and a half squad of Marines. The UT-47a from the Normandy was carrying the other half of the Marine squad, led by a master gunnery sergeant, who had both groups form up and move to a position near Miranda Lawson to await further orders.

Miranda and Karin walked up to Liara and Garrus. “Garrus … it’s good to see you again. Dr T’Soni … it’s been a long time. Seems as if you and I only meet when Commander Shepard’s life is at stake.” Indicating her companions with a wave of her hands, she continued, “Doctor Chakwas doesn’t need an introduction, but I do want you to meet the Normandy’s new Chief NCO in charge of the Weapons Systems Division, Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton.”

After everyone said their hellos, Miranda drew close to Liara and quietly said: “Lieutenant Sherri Morse is standing by to transport you to the Normandy; Edie will meet you in the hanger and accompany you to the Med Bay, where she’ll facilitate a joining between you and Shepard … Rachael wants to talk to you before … well, before we attempt to join her to a physical body.”

Liara’s eyes went wide with surprise. “What … what will you doing while I’m on the Normandy?”

“Garrus will take us down to the freezers. Karin and I will check the condition of the clones you found, plus look at any others that may be down there. The Marines will accompany us, just in case we run afoul of any more active mechs. Weapons have all been modified to kill synthetics in one or two shots. After I check status of the pods and confer with Karin regarding the clones, we’ll return to the Normandy to discuss our findings while Samantha Traynor enters our reports into a database for analysis. We’ll then select the best candidate from the viable clones to transfer over to Harbinger – that’s where we’ll perform the operation.”

Liara nodded her understanding; bringing up her omnitool, she entered a command, causing Miranda’s tool to light up in response. “This is the information you will need to open the
compartment I originally opened … It includes all the data from an OSD I discovered earlier—data that will enable you to access the compartments I did not open—and the fourteen character alphanumeric code you’ll need to open the hatches.”

Miranda scanned quickly through the information she had just received. “Thank you, Liara. It appears you did most of the hard work for us.”

Miranda’s eyes went wide in surprise as Liara quickly reached around her, drawing her into a close embrace. “I’m glad you’re here,” Liara whispered in her ear. “I can’t imagine us having any success at what we’re going to attempt without you here to lead us through it. Thank you for coming.” Liara kissed her on the cheek before letting go, stepping back and turning to walk to the Normandy shuttle.

Wondering what had brought that on, Miranda touched her cheek with her fingertips as she shifted her focus to Garrus. Looking at the Marine squad leader behind him, she said, “Master Guns, this big turian with the scarred up face was your predecessor on the Normandy, and the ship’s XO on the rare occasion he didn’t accompany Shepard dirt side during the wars—against the Collectors and the Reapers—name is Garrus Vakarian.” She split her attention between the two of them and added, “Patton’s a long-range sniper Garrus, not unlike yourself, so I imagine you’ll have lots to talk about.”

Extending his right hand, Garrus greeted her with, “Pleasure to meet you, Patton. I trust you found the Normandy’s weapon systems up to your standards.”

Patton responded with a grin, “There were a few things I had to do, but I cannot fault your calibrations of the Thanix cannon.” Studying the scars marring Garrus’ features, she boldly stated, “Looks like you took a rocket to the face … lucky it didn’t take your head off.”

Garrus flared his mandibles as he chuckled in response: “I sure didn’t consider myself lucky at the time … hurt so bad, I wished it had ended me. But … after healing up a bit, I came to realize most women like a fellow with scars.”

“Way I heard it, most of those women are Krogan, Garrus.”

Garrus laughed at that. “Yeah, well, there are a few turian females that also appreciate the look.” Pausing to look closely at the young woman, he asked, “Miranda said you are a long range sniper … what’s your weapon of choice?”

“I use a Helix model 10 Rifle from Jörmangund Technology with a custom scope, stock, recoil damper, and specially modified block shaver,” she said with more than a hint of pride.

“Impressive … very impressive,” observed the turian.

As they talked about their passion for long-range weapons, the shuttlecraft with Liara aboard lifted off for the short flight back to the Normandy. Miranda soon interrupted Garrus and Patton’s discussion on the relative merits of ejectable versus self-contained heat-sinks by touching Garrus on the upper arm. Whispering, “Ready when you are, Archangel,” she stood back for him to take the lead as Patton moved to rejoin her squad. After a short briefing, during which they prepped for a mechanized reception, she nodded towards Miranda and reported, “Ready when you are, Specialist Lawson.”

Looking around at the people in front of him, Garrus dropped and flared his mandibles as he spoke: “There are numerous rows of shipping crates in the chamber we have to go through, each of which contains an inactive LOKI mech. I don’t believe they can self-activate, but we should be prepared in case there is some form of defensive activation program. Liara and I blasted the previously active
mechs, including several YMIR mechs that attempted to kill us.” Pausing to collect his thoughts, he added, “I understand your weapons are all modified specifically to kill mechs; as there are no organic enemies on this station, that’s excellent. Everyone ready?”

Receiving nods of agreement from Miranda and Patton, Garrus opened the elevator, waited as everyone entered, then boarded and activated the car to descend to level 20.

♦ NORMANDY · DECK THREE, SERVER COMPARTMENT ♦

Edie Coré met Liara as she stepped out of the shuttle inside the frigate’s hanger bay. “Welcome back to the Normandy, Shadow Broker.”

Liara’s cheeks darkened slightly at the greeting. “Thank you, EDI. It’s good to see you again. And those clothes … I expected you to be wearing an Alliance uniform.”

Edie smiled. “Along with a name change, Admiral Hackett requested I stay aboard the Normandy as a liaison for Rachael’s presence inside the computer core, as well as for my analytical and deep-space navigation skills. As far as the Alliance is concerned, I am a civilian contractor named Edie Coré.”

Liara stopped and stared at Edie for a moment before saying, “Were the Illusive Man still alive, I’m sure he would appreciate the irony of your name, although I sincerely doubt the Dr Eva platform or Jack Harper’s former lover would approve.”

Edie continued to walk towards the elevator without comment, prompting Liara to ask, “I’m a bit surprised we’re not meeting Shepard in the loft, Edie.”

“The loft has a new inhabitant in the person of Captain William Cody.”

Entering the elevator, Liara could only think, So many changes in such a short time! New captain, new crew members … and EDI! Edie now has a name and a job, as a civilian. Goddess! What will happen to Rachael if … No! Not if! When! … when she’s rejoined with a body of flesh and blood? Liara’s thoughts continued to churn and tumble about as a touch of fear knotted up her insides. So much can go wrong … what if the cloned bodies are unusable? They’ve been in cold storage for so long. I don’t know if I can continue on if Rachael doesn’t survive the procedure. And if she does survive, what then? What if she’s different? Will she remember me … remember us?

All of this and more sprinted through her mind, endlessly twisting and snaking about as the elevator stopped on Deck Three and the door segments retracted. “Liara?” Edie looked at the asari with a touch of concern. “Dr T’Soni?”

Liara finally heard her name and responded, “Goddess … I’m sorry,” as she once again became aware of her surroundings. “Thank you Edie. I’m afraid I got a little lost in my own thoughts for a few moments. Please, lead on.” She slowly stepped out of the elevator and followed the organic/mechanical hybrid woman around the starboard side elevator supports, past the mess tables and into the Med Bay.

Edie locked the access hatch behind them, then waved her omnitool at the glass walls, rendering them reflective on the outside. Indicating the medical bed closest to the server compartment, she said, “Please lie down, Liara. I must remain close enough to maintain physical contact with you while I connect with Rachael in the server.”

♦ LAZARUS RESEARCH STATION ♦
Garrus waved everyone to silence as the elevator ground to a halt on level twenty; after listening to what seemed like a deathly silence for a number of seconds, the turian opened the door partway in order to visually inspect the area immediately beyond the car; seeing nothing new since he and Liara had left the level behind days before, he allowed the door segments to retract fully into the bulkheads.

In a quiet voice, he said, “Everyone, listen up: Kinetic barriers on maximum. Master Guns, choose two from your squad to stay here … this elevator is our only way out of this area, and we’ve explored none of the levels between this one and the hanger deck. Any active mechs above us could attempt to take the car.” After receiving a consenting nod from Patton, he added, “Take the rest of your squad to the right … circle the perimeter. Liara and I didn’t explore that direction before, so be on the lookout for more active LOKI mechs. Just … make sure your path is clear before leaving cover.”

With an acknowledging nod from the master gunnery sergeant, he continued with, “Miranda and Doctor Chakwas will accompany me around to the left … I don’t expect there are any active mechs left down here, but be careful. Everybody understand?”

Receiving murmurs of acceptance from the group, Garrus hefted his assault rifle and said, “One more thing … there are two high-speed cranes at the far corners of the ceiling. When Liara and I first came down here, I had to take out four mechs before they could be dropped in our vicinity; the cranes picked up and dropped another four LOKI’s before we could get out of here. I meant to disable the cranes, but became distracted by a YMIR trying to disable us. Fortunately, the cranes have not been active since our first visit, but keep a lookout … they operate with virtually no noise. If either one moves from their current location, expect a special delivery.” After a brief pause, he said, “Let’s do this.”

As Patton’s selected guards took up sentry positions on either side of the elevator opening, she brought her assault rifle up, motioned to the remnant of her squad and started off alongside the stacked crates to the right. Garrus gave her a ten-second head start before motioning Miranda and Karin to follow him to the left.

The turian looked approvingly at Miranda’s heavily modified geth Plasma Shotgun; the former Cerberus operative had it loaded with disrupter enhanced ammunition, giving the gun an edge against any sort of Mech she encountered. ‘Just like old times with Miranda on my flank. Killer biotics and a deadly attitude. Shouldn’t have any trouble taking care of whatever comes our way.’

They had made their way to the far left wall and were advancing alongside it when he heard gunfire from across the huge warehouse; Patton had apparently run into some mechanical resistance. After a few moments, silence descended once again, until Patton checked in on their comms: “Found several LOKI mechs in standby mode, folded down on the deck. We didn’t give them time to activate.”

“Good work, Master Guns,” Garrus responded. “Better be on the lookout for a YMIR to appear; they seem to be the standard response for aggression against the LOKI’s down here.”

“Roger that, Garrus,” she replied.

Garrus had reached the far wall without incident; looking to his right, he could see Patton and her squad advancing towards them. Keying his comm, he said, “Watch your six and nine, Patton. There may be mechs in between the crates as you come this way.”

Hearing the double-click of a comm mic in response, he continued towards the main hatch he and Liara had opened on their last visit; stopping at the side, he waited as Patton and her squad arrived on the other side of the large door.
Garrus looked at Miranda, who docked her shotgun and activated her omnitool in order to view the instructions given to her by Liara. Quickly going to the section dealing with the ‘project’, she discovered a total of nine clones had been created during the two years Rachaël Shepard was splayed out on the med bed in the laboratory above the hangers.

One had been stolen by Maya Brooks—‘appropriated’ was the word Brooks had used—in a misguided attempt to replace the legitimate Commander Shepard with a look-alike that would be more in tune with Maya’s Cerberus ideals. The demise of the clone at Shepard’s hand was somewhat regrettable, as it would have been nice to have had a doppelgänger make the run to the beam … make the choice on the Citadel … while the real Shepard remained safe on the Normandy. Too bad the clone had been trained by Brooks—there would have been no way to trust that it would make the correct decision.

Miranda inspected the thick doors blocking compartment access, first on the left side, then on the right of the compartment she was waiting to open. The specialist looked around quickly, took a deep breath, then raised her omnitool and entering the command and password sequence to unlock and open the hatch; within a minute, the door rose straight up to reveal a glittering kinetic barrier protecting three stasis pods.

“Garrus,” she whispered. “We’ll need to inspect the contents of the other chambers as soon as possible … there’s supposed to be an additional five clones down here.”

Looking at Karin, Miranda tilted her head towards the opening; saying, “Come on,” she eased through the barrier and moved to the stasis pod on the left as Karin went to the right side. They each used their omni tools to establish the viability of the clones within. Miranda, having seen all this before, was finished a bit sooner than Karin, so moved to the center and inspected that stasis pod.

After a few moments, she secured her tool and moved back out of the storage compartment into the relative warmth of the large warehouse, to be joined by Karin moments later.

Karin cocked her head at Miranda as she rubbed her hands together and reported, “The one on the right appears to be a good, viable candidate, Miranda. The pod appears to be functioning as designed.” The doctor activated her omnitool and sent the readings she’d gleaned from the pod to Specialist Traynor on the Normandy. Once everyone was back on the ship, she would generate a comparison chart of all the readings obtained.

Miranda nodded slowly as she glanced at the readings she’d obtained, before sending them along to Traynor. Moving towards the right side, she muttered, “Let’s get this compartment open … check the rest of the pods.” Activating her omnitool once more, she found and activated the text string enabling the haptic interface. As Dr T’Soni had done outside the first compartment, she entered a fourteen character alpha-numeric code, causing the interface to change color to a green crossbar with a rotating orange ring around it, counting down from 60. As the count reached zero, there was an immediate sound of latches being released, followed shortly by the door sluggishly moving upwards, revealing a shimmery blue kinetic barrier across the opening as it rose.

As in the previous compartment, overhead lights winked on in response to Miranda’s entry, allowing her to see five stasis pods lined up side-by-side. This compartment, being considerably larger than the first one they’d visited, seemingly had room for more. There was a gap between the second and third pod—inspecting the floor, Miranda could discern a faint pattern in the dust delineating the outline of a stasis pod; it most likely was where the pod stolen by Maya Brooks had been positioned.

Waving at Karin, Miranda started visually inspecting the clones through the small, frost-covered view ports as Karin launched her omnitool’s data gathering function, recording status readings from the pods themselves. Garrus, inspecting the perimeter around the rear of the pods, nearly tripped
over a pair of LOKI mechs folded down in their standby posture. With a word of warning to Miranda and Karin, he undocked and extended his shotgun while backing away from the mechanical guards.

Fortunately for everyone, the mechs had been inactive in the cold environment long enough that their power cells had become virtually depleted; neither of them had enough energy to achieve a standing, weapons-ready posture.

After conferring with Dr Chakwas, Miranda pointed to the fourth pod from the left end. “I think we should give this one a high priority, along with the number three pod on the right end in the first chamber. Add them to whichever pods you feel have the most potential, then we’ll confer once Traynor runs her analysis. I also want to speak with Liara and Rachaël before we move even one pod.”

♦ NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY ♦

Liara T'Soni, lying in the medical bed closest to the ship’s server compartment, was waking from a very pleasant dream, in which she and Rachaël were enjoying the warm, white sand beach near her country estate. They had played in the gentle surf, eaten lunch in the shade provided by some nearby trees, and were now basking in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

As her mind left the closeness that was Rachaël’s consciousness in the server, Liara once again experienced the nearly overwhelming sense of emptiness she felt each time she was forced to leave Shepard’s world inside the core. A gentle voice laced with concern reached her from close by; there was someone standing over her, a warm hand cradling the side of her face.

“Liara? Dr T'Soni? It’s time to wake up … your allotted time in the server is done.” Edie. It was Edie, standing beside her, holding onto her … an anchor, to keep her from losing her way in Shepard’s world. Cracking her eyes open, she could see the amber visor in front of Edie’s eyes; she could also see the projection of her lover, standing near the foot of the bed. *Oh, merciful Goddess! Please let this work and don't make me endure this separation any longer!*

Reaching up, Liara covered the hand that cradled her cheek. “Edie … How long was I with her this time?”

“Just over two hours, Liara. Your increase in mental endurance is impressive.” A hand slipped between the bed and her back, helping her to sit up. “I have been informed the *Normandy* shuttle has returned from the remnants of Lazarus Station. As soon as they’re docked below, Miranda and Karin wish to speak with you … and Shepard, regarding the results of their visit to the storage facility. They will meet us here in the Med Bay.” Edie looked at Liara with an eye towards her physical well-being. “You appear pale. I will bring you an energy drink and a protein bar. Please wait here.”

As Edie left for the Mess Area, Dr Chakwas and Miranda came through the door, with Miranda speaking first: “Rachaël? Good … we need to speak with you and Liara.”

Karin pulled two chairs out of the server compartment; as Liara and Miranda sat, she rolled her desk chair over to join the pair, while Rachaël stood by. Edie returned with the promised energy drink and protein bar; after handing them to Liara, she moved to stand beside Rachaël’s projection as Miranda began speaking.

“Specialist Traynor is already correlating all the data we obtained from the eight stasis pods we found in storage. As soon as she’s done compiling and analyzing the data, we can compare our findings
and choose the one of the eight we feel will have the best chance for a successful joining with Rachaël’s life-force.”

Liara asked, “You didn’t bring them back with you?”

“Not until we are absolutely positive about our selection. I don’t want to disturb the stasis pods unnecessarily; when we move one, it’ll not be coming here, but will be going straight into Harbinger.” Miranda’s forehead creased in thought as she looked at Rachaël. “Do you feel you are ready for this, Shepard? There’s no guarantee we … or Harbinger … will be successful in rejoining your presence with a physical body. We’re delving into realms completely foreign to everything we’ve ever imagined or thought about concerning intelligent life.”

Shepard’s image dimmed slightly as she looked first at Liara, then at Miranda. After several moments, she appeared to sigh, then answered, “Miranda … I have faith in your knowledge and abilities … and I trust you, which is not something I would have said when we first took on the Collectors.” She looked at Liara as she continued speaking to Miranda. “You rebuilt me once …”

“ … with a massive amount of Reaper technology, Shepard.”

After pausing at the interruption, Rachaël continued, “…which enabled me to survive as an entity in the Normandy’s computer.” After a brief pause, she added, “The difference for us this time is Harbinger … who appears to now be on our side.”

It was Miranda’s turn to sigh. “Okay then. We’ll choose the most likely candidate from those available and move … her … into Harbinger’s construction lab. I’ll let you know when we’re ready for you.”

_A/N: It must be noted that Liara, having departed for the Pax System before Normandy arrived at the Citadel, has no knowledge of the details of Admiral Hackett’s meeting with the ships’ crew, so was not aware of his decision regarding the continued presence of Edie on the ship._
Exploring The Past

Study the past if you would define the future — Confucius, 551 BC – 479 BC

**XO** — Executive Officer – second in command of the vessel; answers to the ship’s captain.

**STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA**

The minute the *Normandy* shuttlecraft with Miranda Lawson aboard cleared her line of departure, Captain Yuán had set the *Hong Kong* on a course to the Strenuus System; accompanied by the Repositories Žiuk’Durmah and Asharru, she intended to dock with and explore the former Cerberus facility known as Minuteman Station, in orbit about the gas giant Thesalgon. She hoped to avoid being fired upon by the station’s apparently augmented defensive array. If the VI controlling the station’s weapons chose to open fire on her companions, she felt that Žiuk’Durmah’s main weapon would be more than equal to the task of disabling or destroying the guns.

From her seat in the navigator’s chair on the bridge, she watched with interest as they approached the station from a low orbit around the backside of the planet. As Flight Lieutenant Spencer slowed their velocity, Flight Lieutenant Hall called out distances. “Approaching 10,000 Kilometers, Captain.”

“Very good, Wendy. Raise shields.” Activating her omnitool, she sent a two-word message to Žiuk’Durmah, with a copy to Asharru: “Wait here.”

Receiving acknowledgements from both Repositories, Yuán waited to see what would happen as they continued their approach—she wasn’t at all sure the station VI would allow the *Hong Kong* to approach closer than 5000 Klicks. “Stay alert, both of you,” she said to her pilots. “As far as Cerberus is—or was—concerned, this is an Alliance vessel, so would most assuredly be automatically targeted as hostile.”

Staff Lieutenant Cross was monitoring their approach from his position at the galaxy map in the CIC; he informed them over the ship’s comm that the ship was being scanned. Spencer looked over his shoulder at Xiùlán. “Think we’re being targeted, Ma’am?”

“I’d almost bet on it,” Yuán replied grimly. Even as she gave voice to her thought, the Bridge and CIC comms came alive with an automated message, apparently generated by the VI: “Alliance Frigate Hong Kong. Please lock your Navigation Aid onto the homing beacon for docking within the station.”

Raising an eyebrow at Spencer, Xiùlán sighed. “May as well see where it’ll take us, Gordon.” Touching the comm device in her ear, she said, “Mr Cross, send a message to Asharru and Žiuk’Durmah. Tell him what we’re doing so they don’t go into attack mode when we don’t immediately reappear.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

Xiùlán sat back in the navigator’s chair, thinking about what needed to be done. Miranda had passed all the information she had about this station to Xiùlán’s omnitool before departing for the *Normandy*. *I only hope it’s enough,* came the worried thought.

**NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY**
Closely followed by Specialist Samantha Traynor, Captain Bill Cody entered the Med Bay on Deck Three and walked towards the server compartment. Upon hearing the hatch segments retracting, Miranda and Karin turned in that direction; Miranda was the first to speak.

“Captain Cody, Sir …” Offering her hand, she added, “… nice to see you again. We were just discussing a plan to join Shepard’s life-force with one of the clones discovered in storage aboard the station.” Taking notice of Traynor following Cody, she added, “Traynor. Good … have you completed your analysis of the information we provided?”

Cody responded first. “‘Life-force?’ Is that what you’re calling, …” looking meaningfully at Shepard’s image, he finished with, “… the commander, as she exists in the server?”

“Yes, Sir,” Lawson replied with no hesitation, before looking expectantly at Traynor.

Traynor shyly looked at the datapad she was cradling in her arms before glancing up at Cody. Receiving a wink and a nod from her captain, she smiled tentatively as she began reading the results aloud. “First off, each of the clones in storage is viable … any one of the eight would be a good candidate for joining with the Commander. However, my analysis suggests the clone in pod number four inside the second chamber would be the best choice for the attempt.” Pressing a control on her interface caused both Miranda’s and Karin’s omnitools to briefly activate. “I just sent a copy to each of you so you can review my analysis.”

Miranda grinned at the specialist. “Thank you, Ms Traynor.” Turning to Cody, she said, “With your permission, I would like to return to the station with one of the Normandy’s engineers … perhaps Ken Donnelly. All of the pods in storage are connected to the station’s power grid. We’ll need to set up a portable power source to maintain the internal conditions for the pod we’re going to move.”

Cody nodded in agreement. “Excellent idea … in fact, we’ll send Tali’Zorah along with him. If that pair can’t come up with a plan to temporarily power one of those pods, then nobody can.” Directing his attention towards Specialist Traynor, he asked, “Is Harbinger prepared to receive the stasis pod? We should talk to him before we begin the move … be sure we can land a shuttle inside what he euphemistically refers to as a hanger, as I’m pretty sure Ms Lawson doesn’t wish to move the pod more than once.”

Miranda nodded in agreement, saying, “Precisely. The less we disturb the pod prior to opening it, the better. I was not involved with the secondary clone project, so know little of how they were created or how long they were intended to survive in cold storage.”

“Okay … it appears as if we know what we need to do. Ms Lawson, come with me to the QEC chamber so we can speak with Harbinger. As soon as he confirms he’s ready, we’ll send you back to the station with Engineer Donnelly.”

Liara, having remained quiet up until now, spoke in a thoughtful tone. “Garrus and I did not explore any of the levels between the storage deck and the hanger deck, Captain … and while what will be needed to remotely power a pod may exist on one of the other levels, Ms Traynor’s suggestion makes very good sense.”

Cody nodded at Dr T’Soni’s assessment. “Reasonable precaution … I’ll have Greg Adams send our
engines over to the station. I’ll also have him contact Sandra Patton; she can take her Marine squad through the other levels between the hanger deck and storage deck … see what else is there.” Looking at Miranda, he said, “Ms Lawson, if you would?” As he turned to leave, he said over his shoulder, “If you wish, you may ride over with the engineers, Dr T’Soni.”

Liara thought for a moment before answering. “If I may, I’d like to remain here; Rachaël and I have a lot to discuss.”

Cody paused and turned back, dropping his head in embarrassed realization that he hadn’t considered their situation. His chin came back up and he met Liara’s eyes; he didn’t know her very well, but even he could see the pain and concern behind her steady gaze. “Of course, Doctor. I should have thought of that. Please, take all the time you and the commander need.”

Cody turned and followed Miranda and Traynor out of the Med Bay, leaving Liara and Dr Chakwas to remain, along with Rachaël’s projected image.

♦

DECK TWO • WAR ROOM♦

Harbinger asked, Cody-Captain; Lawson-Specialist. How may I assist you?

“We need some information from you, Harbinger,” Cody replied. “You must be aware we are planning to retrieve a clone residing in a stasis pod on Lazarus Station. We need to know if you have a landing platform adjacent to the inner hatch where we’ll be able to offload a stasis pod.”

The image of Harbinger hovering over the status display table dissolved into an image of the interior of the immense space inside, with a point of view taken from the docks where the Hong Kong, among others, had once resided. The view shifted closer, allowing Miranda and Cody to see that there was a platform immediately outside the main entry into Harbinger’s structure. I believe this platform should suffice, Cody–Captain. Enough space exists for one of your shuttles, plus cargo. I will standby to receive a shuttle when you are ready.


You will need to dock Normandy-frigate within my structure. A physical connection will need to be established between Normandy-computer and my own server in order to transfer Shepard-Normandy to Shepard-Harbinger. Once this is accomplished, I will be able to transfer Shepard-Harbinger to her new physical shell.

Miranda did not give voice to the thought that flitted through her mind. Damn. I get the impression Harbinger is not revealing everything, as if he is purposely withholding information from us. What the hell is he hiding? I need to speak with Rachaël.

Cody was saying something. “… thanks, Harbinger. We will contact you when we’re ready to dock.”

Logging you out, Cody-Captain.

As the construct’s image pixilated and disappeared in a swirl of reds and purples, Miranda touched Cody’s arm. “Captain. I need to speak with Rachaël again, and I’d like you to be there to hear what I have to say to her.”

Cody smiled at the Hong Kong’s communications specialist. “Whatever you need, Ms Lawson. Where do …?”
“Conference room should suffice, Sir,” she responded.

**MINUTEMAN STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA**

Having docked without incident within the cavernous hanger on board the apparently abandoned station, Xiùlán was meeting with her XO and the Marine squad leader prior to leading a ground team to explore the station. “Lieutenant Cross? You’re in charge of the ship while I’m groundside. Corporal Vic? We’re going to do a cursory inspection of the area just inside the hanger … maybe go up a level and down one. If we can, I’d really like to find the controls for the station’s VI—reset the damned program to stop it from targeting Repositories.” Xiùlán paused for a moment before continuing. “Garrus and Liara encountered more than a few LOKI mechs on Lazarus Station; keep your eyes and ears open for those, along with Heavy Mechs.” Thinking about all she knew or suspected about this place, she added, “One last thing; intel doesn’t know if there are any people still alive here … I’m inclined to believe everyone left when Cerberus abandoned it, but we cannot assume that is the case. Any humans we come across, benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise. We clear?”

After receiving firm nods from Vic and his squad, she looked at Cross. “Monitor our comms, Lieutenant. I don’t expect we’ll run into any trouble, but you have to know … if trouble does exist on this station, it’s gonna come looking for me.”

**NORMANDY · DECK TWO, CONFERENCE ROOM**

Within a few minutes, Captain Cody, Specialist Lawson and Shepard’s projected image were in the conference room to listen to the specialist, who started with, “Rachael, you probably believe that when my team and I brought you back from death’s door on Alchera, we repaired your body—and I’m ashamed to say I allowed you to continue to believe that you were really … you.”

Miranda looked down at the table for several moments, causing Cody to begin fidgeting. When she looked back up, it was to squarely face Shepard’s projection as she continued, “There was simply too much damage to your body, Rachael. We couldn’t repair you … not a chance in hell. Except for your head, neck and upper left torso, your body was basically destroyed … nothing but charred remains … your right lower arm and right leg were completely gone, and your left leg was gone below the knee.”

If Shepard had actually been standing there, she would have collapsed into a chair. “I believed you, Miranda … Dammit to hell! You let me believe you had pulled off some kind of miracle by reconstructing my body. I … shit! I really felt like it was me! So, what the hell was I? Some kind of fucking automaton?”

Miranda’s expression remained neutral as she responded, “No, Commander. You were really you when you woke up on the station. Your body, however … was mostly cloned.”

“So that’s what you meant when you mentioned not being involved in the secondary clone project …” Rachael paused as she thought back. “You spent two years bringing me back … all that time … you were growing a damned clone? But Liara swore it was really me! What the fuck did you do to me, Lawson?”

“Creating a clone of your body was the easy part.” Miranda hesitated to deliver the news but she was committed to her path now, so took a deep breath and pressed on. “The Illusive Man had already done that much; shortly after you were declared a Spectre, he acquired a DNA sample and started the process immediately, because he knew, even back then, you were the last, best hope for
humanity. We already had the body nearly full grown when you ... got spaced over Alchera ... but it took us nearly two years to figure out a way to maintain your consciousness, your mind and spirit. We had to create entirely new technologies to repair your main torso and then graft it to the parts of the cloned body that you needed.”

Shepard growled, “Which was practically everything!”

“Agreed ... but it was necessary! Even so, in order to make it all work we had to insert a large number of implants, most of which were based on Reaper tech ... and that is probably the only reason your spiritual essence ended up in the Normandy’s server banks, since portions of this ship’s computer were stolen from Sovereign’s main processor after its destruction at the Citadel.”

Rachaël’s facial expression, even though it was a projection, had clouded over into an expression of barely contained rage. “You let me believe you managed to salvage me from Alchera ... that you rebuilt me, repaired my body ... my original body. Why?”

“I had no choice in the matter, Shepard. The Illusive Man was adamant that you not be told the truth. We did salvage your body ... all of the important parts that remained, anyway. Those parts included your head ... your mind! In the end, does it really matter that we used pieces from a clone to rebuild your body?” Miranda wasn’t backing down, even as Shepard moved to stand right in front of her. “You still had your free will, Rachaël ... It was the only reason you were able to turn your back on Harper, destroy the Collector base and then help the Alliance stop the Reaper threat permanently.”

“So I was really a freaking Frankensteinian construct? Pieces of the real me, parts from a clone ... and, to top it all off ... you added Reaper tech!”

“Yes! Reaper tech, Shepard! As I said earlier, you would have been dead without it! Think about that before you condemn me or my actions. Cerberus saved your goddamned life, Rachaël! Without the clone, without that tech, you’d be dead, the galaxy would be in tatters, and Liara ... Liara would be without any hope of spending a future with you!” Miranda was getting irritated with Shepard’s pigheaded attitude. “Is that truly what you want, Rachaël?” Miranda stepped close and stared with righteous anger directly into the eyes of the commander’s projection as she poked a finger into the center of the projection. “If it is, we can pull the plug on this whole fucking project right now! Just say the word!”

After several very tense moments of cold silence, Shepard finally took a step backward in conciliation. “Fuck!” Shepard paused and looked at the shocked faces of Captain Cody and Specialist Traynor. “I guess it doesn’t really change anything; not at this point.” She shook her head. “I cannot do that to Liara ... not now.” Her eyes returned to Miranda. “So, what happens next? How do I get implanted into the new cloned body?”

Nodding to accept the fragile truce, Miranda replied softly, “Harbinger first needs to move your consciousness from the Normandy server to his own memory core. Once that is complete, he’ll attempt the implantation into the clone. Assuming that’s successful, you’ll be free of the confines of the Normandy computer, just like Edie, and you’ll be completely organic once more ... the only Reaper tech will be your amp ... it’s a radical piece of technology, way beyond anything being used today. When we’re done, you can join Liara, move with her to Thessia, begin a whole new life. Not many people get a third chance to beat death, Rachaël.”

Miranda’s calm expression and even tone had somewhat mollified Rachaël’s anger at being lied to during the Collector Campaign. “Okay then. Call me when you’re ready to start ... I’ll be with Liara ... We have much more to talk about than I originally believed.”
Ken Donnelly and Tali’Zorah had been escorted to the clone storage area by Garrus, where Tali was inspecting the power couplings on the pod selected by Specialist Traynor, and Donnelly was checking power draw and calculating how much reserve a portable power source would need to maintain the clone’s viability for a short time.

Tali looked at Ken as she asked, “What do you think, Mr Donnelly? Can we use a pair of power cells from engineering to keep this pod in operation for an hour or so? Cables shouldn’t be a problem … connectors are standard, off-the-shelf hardware.”

“We’ll be fine as long as there’s nae delay in gettin’ tha pod connected tae a hard power source inside ‘at bloody big Reaper,” came the reply. “We’ll need tae have a power cell connected afore we disconnect station power from tha pod, and I’ll bring a coupla spare cells, just in case we’re delayed in getting’ tha pod hooked into tha Reaper’s power.”

“Perfect. Let’s get back to the Normandy,” Tali said. “You pick up what we need for power cells and cabling while I report what we’re doing to Miranda.”

The pair left the storage room to find Garrus. Meanwhile …

**LEVEL FIFTEEN**

Level Fifteen was an enormous area consisting of numerous small manufacturing labs, clean rooms and research labs situated along both sides of three hallways—one each on the left and right sides of the compartment—with the third one running straight out from the elevator.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton had been tasked with exploring the level for anything that could prove useful to Miranda’s job of freeing Shepard’s spirit from the Normandy’s computer core. To that end, she placed two Marines at the elevator as she had done on level twenty, before splitting her remaining ten Marines into two four-man teams, each led by a sergeant.

“Bates, you’re Red Team—circle to the right; Hickman, you’re Blue Team—I want you to circle to the left. I’ll take Green Team straight up the middle. We’re looking for anything—equipment, implantable tech gear, even biotic amps—if it looks like it’s valuable, note what it is and its location by grid square. We’ll leave it for Specialist Lawson or Dr T’Soni to decide if they want us to retrieve it. Questions? Concerns?”

After a brief pause, she continued, “I refuse to believe the few mechs discovered by the turian and the asari were all that’s active on this station—not with a warehouse full of ’em on level twenty. Set weapons with disrupter enhanced ammo, and do not hesitate to take down any active mechs you come across, because they won’t hesitate to kill you. Everyone clear?” Seeing nods of understanding from everyone, she said, “Okay. Sergeants, keep your comms open. Let’s get this done.”

Nodding to the Marines on her own six, Patton said, “Campbell … Westmoreland … Let’s see what we can find in here.” Starting forward, she held her assault rifle at the ready as she advanced slowly. As first Sarah, then Bethany, opened doors to the labs on either side of the hall; Patton watched the passage in both directions while whichever of the two corporals investigating a lab had the other looking for hostiles inside. It was slow going at first, until the three fell into a natural rhythm.

It wasn’t long before what Patton had feared came to pass—the sounds of miniaturized hydraulic
pumps, very much like the sounds made by the geth, were rapidly followed by synthesized speech "HALT! YOU ARE TRESPASSING" coming from somewhere beyond the end of the passageway.

Patton quickly motioned Bethany into the room immediately on her right, while she and Sarah ducked into the lab on the left—in each instance, her corporals kneeled in the doorways with their backs against the retractable door segment, preventing them from closing. Patton remained standing, leaning out just enough to see each end of the passageway. “Sergeants … Sitrep,” she whispered.

Hickman reported in first: “Blue Team … negative contact.”

Bates answered, “Standby …” then, “We got movement …” followed by the sounds of automatic weapons fire. Patton could hear Bates breathing and the close-by sound of his assault rifle as he fired at the mechs. It was over almost as soon as it began, ending with a pair of dull thuds followed by the sound of polycrystalline-composite shards hitting the walls and ceiling.

After several seconds of silence, her Red Team lead reported in. “Master Guns? … Bates. Two LOKI mechs destroyed … No team injuries. We’ll continue checking these labs … already found two that Specialist Lawson needs to follow up on.”

“Acknowledged.” Patton nodded to Bethany, who immediately stood and entered the compartment as Sarah crossed the hallway to join her; Patton remained as she was, continuing to listen and look for mechs. Her vigilance was rewarded as soon as her corporals rejoined her—an overhead panel at the far end of the passage retracted, followed by the appearance of a gimbal-mounted mini-gun, which began firing at the floor as the targeting computer brought the barrels up in their direction.

“Shit!” Bethany dove for the doorway she’d just left, reentering the room just ahead of the closing door segments; Sarah executed a rolling dive for the door in which Patton was still standing. The trail of high-velocity bullets was able to follow Sarah into the compartment, as the gimbal-mounted weapon traversed the width of the passageway sideways. Patton ducked into the room, allowing the door segments to close as the unrelenting stream of bullets chewed the advancing edges of the door panels.

Patton was on the comm as the door segments finished coming together. “Bates! Hickman! Watch for deploying ceiling-mounted weaponry … appears to be triggered by doors being opened.”

A chuckle from Hickman preceded his reply. “Is that what made all that noise? You guys need a hand disabling it?”

Patton sighed. “Looks that way. Damn thing can traverse sideways—further down the passage it can’t shoot into the rooms—we’re close enough to it that it can.” Patton paused as the sound of an assault rifle could be heard across the hall; Westmoreland was trying to disable the thing from her side. Patton waved her hand through the Haptic lock, causing the hatch to open as the mini gun returned Bethany’s fire; the trail from its bullets quickly marched across the passage to begin chewing the door frame behind her as she rolled back into the compartment, allowing the door to close as bits and pieces exploded off from the unrelenting stream of metal.

“Dammit!” Patton keyed her Comms. “You okay, Corporal?”

“I’m okay, Master Guns. Damn thing is fast. Managed to tickle it, but it’s got a kinetic barrier. Need something to punch through that.”

Patton had had enough of this troublesome security measure. “Hickman, I seriously doubt there’s any cover in the connecting passage at the end, so you and Bates stay back until I give the word.
When I say ‘GO’, I want each of you to unload on the damned thing in sequence, Hickman first. As soon as Bates draws its attention, I’m going to attempt to take it down.” As she was speaking, she docked her assault rifle, then undocked and extended her Helix model 10; choosing enhanced armor piercing rounds, she readied herself to quickly acquire the target, fire and withdraw.

Saying, “Westmoreland, stay put … Bates and Hickman are going to draw its attention. Sergeants, you both ready?” She positioned herself beside the closed door as she received replies from both men. With the muzzle of her weapon pointed up, she crouched on her right knee, with her left foot on the floor, leg bent ninety degrees. Looking up at Sarah, she said, “Corporal, when I tell Bates and Hickman to go, count to three, then open this door.”

With Campbell’s “Aye”, she took a firm grip on her rifle, opened her comms, took a breath and said “GO” as she breathed out. There was an immediate reply from Hickman’s assault rifle; this was quickly answered by the mini gun. As Bates began firing his assault rifle, Campbell opened the hatch, allowing Patton to bring her rifle to bear on the mini-gun, which was just finishing its 180 degree half-circle to return Bates’ fire.

Patton sighted the mini gun’s shield generator through her scope and squeezed the trigger; the heavy round penetrated the kinetic barrier and connected, causing significant damage. Firing again, she destroyed the shield generator as the weapon’s VI began swinging the gun around to meet the threat from this new direction. Targeting the VI module through her scope, she squeezed off her third shot and rolled her body to her left, back into the compartment, as a line of bullets traveled down the passage towards her. The sudden silence as the mini gun stopped firing was met with cheers from Bates and Hickman.

“Good shooting, Master Guns,” reported Bates. “Damned thing appears to be dead.”

Regaining her feet, Patton collapsed and docked the sniper rifle; pulling her assault rifle as she reopened the door, she took a quick look at the end of the passageway, grinning at the view of the mini-gun pointing straight down in its gimbaled mount. Addressing everyone over her comms, she said, “Okay, back to exploring the labs, people. Let’s complete the job, find and disable any other hazards and get back to the hanger deck.”

Now that Patton and her squad had seen the security measures waiting for them on Level Fifteen, they were able to conclude their search of the rest of the labs and offices on the level with a lot more confidence. As Hickman’s and Bate’s teams rejoined Patton in the middle of the transverse passageway, Bethany emerged from a door that led to a small compartment on the far side of the passage. “Master Guns? You need to see this …”

Patton walked up to Westmoreland as she asked, “Whatcha find, Corporal?”

By way of reply, Bethany turned and reentered the small, windowless compartment. “Looks like all the security measures for this level were monitored in here, Master Guns.” Pointing to one of several Haptic interfaces, she added, “This one enables or disables the mini-guns.” Touching several controls, she finished with, “I just disabled the other two. Don’t know why they didn’t target us sooner.”

“No idea what triggers them in the first place?”

“The one that fired on us was activated when I brushed by a control panel in the last lab we inspected. Nothing happened when I touched it, so I assumed it wasn’t important. My mistake, Master Guns … won’t happen again.”

Patton grinned. “I’m gonna hold you to that, Beth. Fortunately for all three of us, we were on edge
after Red Team took out those mechs.” Looking at the control interface again, she spoke softly, almost to herself, “Doesn’t make sense to me … why have the controls for this shit all the way back here?”

“Perhaps there’s another entrance on this side … an elevator we haven’t discovered?”

Patton thought this over for a few seconds before deciding to head back to the main elevator. “Come on, let’s get back up to the hanger. We can pass our findings on to Lawson and let her decide if we need to retrieve anything down here.”

♦ ONBOARD THE NORMANDY, DOCKING WITHIN HARBINGER ♦

“Didn’t we just bail out of one of these things?” Joker had skillfully entered the cavernous space Harbinger referred to—jokingly, Joker felt—as a hanger. With the docking clamps in place, Joker sent word to Commander Adams that their own hanger bay could be opened to permit shuttle operations.

Edie was monitoring Harbinger’s connection to the Normandy’s servers; even though he was connected through the external links on the docking platform, he would take no action until Edie and Shepard-Normandy indicated they were ready for the transfer to take place.

Joker was still skeptical about the commander’s proposed course of action. “Don’t you think she’s jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire?”

“If by that, you mean going from a bad situation to one that will be worse, I don’t believe it to be so. Harbinger is committed to having Shepard made whole. If he is going to seamlessly join her with a cloned body, then this must be the first step.”

“Still don’t like it …” Joker sing-songed in response.

Edie chose not to respond, saying instead as she turned to leave the bridge. “I’m going to the server compartment, Jeff.”

♦ MINUTEMAN STATION, STRENUUUS SYSTEM ♦

After entering the docking area arrival chamber from the Hong Kong, Xiùlán and her team cautiously moved through several passages, all equipped with blast-proof view ports set to allow one to look out onto the docking area. Xiùlán thought it odd to see her ship from the stern, just before she turned to lead her companions up a set of stairs. Surprisingly, the level they came to was well lit, as if the inhabitants had recently left for a snack. There were a number of raised desks in a row, each of which held several terminals; the terminals were all aglow in what appeared to be a stand-by mode. Xiùlán looked at each one as they progressed through the rather large room; she was disappointed to discover that none of them had any information about station defenses.

Arriving at the far end of the level, Xiùlán attempted to open the hatch that greeted them; after five minutes of intense probing, she was finally able to override the lock. When the hatch segments retracted into the bulkheads, the team was met with another passageway, devoid of light or life of any kind. After consulting the map Miranda had provided, Xiùlán set her omnitool to project a light as she led her squad deeper into the station. Vic was growing increasingly nervous, saying, “I don’t mind telling you I don’t like the silence in here, Captain … it’s not natural. Even the equipment noise is muted.”
“Concentrate on listening for the unusual, Corporal,” replied Xiülán. “Should be easy to hear things that present hazards to us, such as Mechs.” Pointing her omnitool light towards the ceiling, she had her team stop as she consulted the map once again. Looking at the closed hatch to her left, she whispered, “This one.”

Unfortunately, none of the hatches lining this passage, including the one in which Xiülán expressed an interest, were currently powered. Muttering, “I didn’t want to do this, but …” she entered several commands into the omnitool’s interface; saying, “Watch your eyes,” she enabled the final command line, resulting in the passageway lights illuminating. More importantly, Haptic interfaces became active on all of the hatches.

Corporal Vic whistled in appreciation before starting to ask, “How in the …”

“I did something I had hoped to avoid doing … I hacked the main computer,” came the reply. Waving her omnitool through the Haptic interface, she brought her shotgun up as the door segments retracted soundlessly into their pockets. Saying, “Come on,” she cautiously stepped through the door opening into what appeared to be a small command and control center, with several counters topped with terminals aglow in muted greens and oranges. On a hunch, she stepped up to the counter on the far right to inspect the terminals. After logging in and entering several commands, she sighed, “This is it.”

“What do you have, Captain?”

Yuán turned towards the corporal with a smile. “This is one of several terminals connected to the ‘identify-friend-or-foe’ sub-routines running on the station’s server. I just modified the program lines that identified our large mechanical friends as the station’s enemies, while reinforcing recognition of Alliance affiliated vessels as ‘friendlies’.”

Vic shook his head in mock amazement. “I’m not even going to ask how, or why, you’d know how to hack into a computer, especially one running a VI.”

Yuán smirked as she replied, “I had a very good instructor, Corporal.” After a brief pause to enter several more commands, she nodded in satisfaction as the terminal chimed in response. “You’ll be happy to know that this entire station is devoid of any lifeforms, other than ours. There are a number of LOKI Mechs in storage, but none are active, and now …” she entered a few more commands before continuing, “… their self-activation protocols have been disabled … they’ll remain dormant even if we walk right up to them.”

Vic had started docking his assault rifle when Xiülán stopped him. “Keep it ready, Corporal. The thing about the station’s VI? It’s a Cerberus program … not something I place any real faith in … certainly not our lives. I would need to have Samantha Traynor dig into its core programming to be sure it doesn’t have a hidden sub-routine.”

“What kind of sub-routine do you think could be buried in the programming, Captain?” The expression on the corporal’s face reflected puzzlement. “It’s a VI, right? It’s not capable of learning … of changing or adapting, is it?”

“Normally, I’d agree with that assessment, Corporal; as I said, the programming was created by Cerberus.” Although Vic couldn’t know why, she frowned as she continued, “I’ve learned to never take anything created by them at face value.”

With an additional command, a station map in schematic form was projected on the wall in front of them. After studying it for several moments, Xiülán had the terminal highlight a section above and behind their current location. “Come on, guys. One more place I want to visit before we leave.”
As Edie left the bridge, Lieutenant Sherri Morse was, without realizing it, thinking thoughts similar to those of the Flight Lieutenant. She was piloting a UT-47a, leaving the Normandy and Harbinger in order to ferry Tali’Zorah, Ken Donnelly and Miranda Lawson back to Lazarus Station; the trio were going to hook a portable power-pack to the pod Miranda had selected, then move it to the hanger deck and onto the shuttle for a flight back to Harbinger. Ken had brought several power cables, along with enough power cells to keep a pod running at full power for several hours—more time than any of them figured they would need to get the pod hooked into Harbinger’s power grid.

After flying through the starship-size opening at the base of his tentacles, she turned and dove to gain clear maneuvering room before heading for the station; in a matter of minutes, she was spinning the shuttle within the hanger and setting it down on the deck. Miranda, Ken and Tali, each carrying various parts and pieces, quickly walked to the elevator in order to descend to level twenty.

Once there, Ken and Tali’Zorah efficiently went about their tasks as Miranda split her attention between monitoring the functions of the pod and searching the station’s database on her omnitool. She had done a great deal of work rebuilding Shepard on Delta level, several levels above the hanger deck. It had been on the medical and support levels where the mechs sabotaged by Wilson had wreaked the most damage; the hatch for the corridor leading to that area was on the other side of the hanger from the current site of operations and had yet to be discovered by anyone.

“Ready to disconnect from station power, Ma’am.” Donnelly was standing beside the pod as he looked expectantly at the Hong Kong’s communication specialist.

After inspecting his preparations, Miranda nodded once, saying, “Make the switch, Mr Donnelly.” Bending to his task, Kenneth had Tali pull the main power cable from its plug; the green pilot light immediately changed to a flashing yellow. Donnelly inserted the adaptive plug attached to the portable power unit he’d brought with him from the Normandy; turning the switch on caused the pod’s pilot light to stop flashing, followed by it reverting to a steady green glow.

“Very good,” commented Miranda. “Now, let’s get this thing up to the hanger deck.” With the stasis generator being maintained by the portable power supply sitting on top of the pod, Tali and Ken placed themselves at either end of the coffin-like container. Tali energized the pod’s built-in mass reduction generator; with the pod now able to float several centimeters above the floor, the pair gently guided it from the refrigerated storage compartment and into the aisle between the shipping containers containing the inactive LOKI Mechs.

Reaching the elevator without incident, they were soon back inside the main hanger with the pod sitting outside of the UT-47a; the crew seats with their backs to the interior partition had been folded by Lieutenant Morse, providing just enough additional space in which to place the pod crosswise between the doors. Donnelly assisted Tali in pushing their awkward cargo up the short ramp into the shuttle—once inside, the eezo powered mass generator was turned off, grounding the pod to the shuttle’s deck plate.

After conferring for several minutes with Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton, Miranda climbed in after the pod and took a seat next to Tali, saying, “Make haste, if you would, Lieutenant. We need to get this pod reconnected to a stable power source.”

Morse replied in a cheery voice, “We’ll be there shortly, Specialist … hang on back there.”
Third Time’s The Charm, Part One

Those freckles make you seem like a galaxy of stars, just waiting to be explored and loved — Nikita Gill

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
OSD – Optical Storage Device, analogous to compact data disks of the early twenty-first century
Siame – “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

♦ MINUTEMAN STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Xiùlán had led her squad up two levels from the terminal location above the docking bay; she was searching for the design schematics and blueprints for the Normandy SR2, which Cerberus had clandestinely constructed at this station. That its launch came shortly after Commander Shepard was revived from a two-year reconstruction project was purely coincidental, as the Cerberus frigate’s construction had begun a number of months prior to Sovereign’s destruction at the Citadel.

The Systems Alliance had barely begun to construct the new space docks needed to replace those destroyed by the Reapers during the war. The process of Synthesis had transformed the Reapers from machines of destruction into machines of repair and reconstruction; as Repositories, they were engaged in repairing and reactivating the Mass Relays, assisting with infrastructure replacement and repair, and even helping with space-borne construction.

Designs for the Alliance Navy’s more advanced ships was evolving rapidly, especially with turian cooperation, but the Normandy SR2’s design was one of a kind for its class; the Alliance wanted to inspect the design schematics with an eye towards modifying them to adhere to accepted philosophy on internal layout of the various departments.

As Xiùlán approached the rather large design center with her team, she held her N7 Crusader at the ready; there were a number of LOKI mechs, folded down on the deck in ‘standby’ mode. As she had hacked into the station VI and altered its programming, she didn’t expect them to activate at her approach, but on a Cerberus station she was taking no chances. “Corporal Vic. Take point … Stay alert. I don’t trust them one bit.”

Having received an acknowledgement from the corporal, she cautiously entered the large room to begin inspecting computer files as Vic and the squad scouted the area.

After glancing around at the layout, Xiùlán zeroed in on a counter that was seemingly set apart; surprisingly, it was not in the center of the chamber, but off to one side, as if isolated from the rest. There were only two terminals on this counter … thinking about the way Cerberus cells operated, Xiùlán surmised the terminal on the right side was used for security operations. As she approached the central terminal, the screen sprang to life, scrolling rapidly through a number of menu selections.

Cautiously touching the haptic keyboard caused the information on the screen to pause scrolling; it changed to a static display of all the menu selections. Inspecting it closely, Xiùlán selected SR2 Design Team Archives, and was rewarded with a sub-menu of selections; each of these was a section dedicated to details of the ship’s interior layout.

After taking a quick look around to see where Vic and his team were, Xiùlán used her omnitool to open the terminal’s files and download the information. Once that was complete, she entered a
request for files related to hull construction details. After poking around a bit in the files returned by her query, she discovered the blueprints for not only the SR2, but for a smaller, ‘corvette-class’ ship and a much larger ‘cruiser’-style vessel; both designs appeared to share the look of the SR2. Additionally, there were specs for a new class of fighter/interceptor that, if built, would add tremendously to the Alliance’s fleet defensive capabilities. Too bad we couldn’t have had these plans before the damned war, she thought. Now, there isn’t any threat I can imagine that can’t be turned back by our brand new friends.

Looking up, she located her squad and said in a loud voice, “Corporal Vic. You or your team find anything of interest?"

“Yes, Ma’am! This place is a treasure trove … lots of cutting edge designs for weapons, FTL drive components, sub-light drives, even mass effect cores and artificial intelligence!"

“AI? Like the geth … or Edie?”

“Exactly. The original version of EDI was the SR2’s AI defense system. This appears to be an upgraded version of the software … have to let Edie look at it to be sure.”

Xiùlán was skeptical. “Let’s download everything we can, Corporal. If it’s too much for omnitools, find some optical disks that we can use.”

“Aye-aye, Ma’am.”

♦ NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY ♦

Liara and Rachaél were discussing the upcoming operation to rejoin her essence—her intelligence, her spirit—with the cloned body being brought to Harbinger’s access platform by Miranda, with Tali’Zorah and Ken Donnelly monitoring the temporary power needed to keep the stasis pod operational. Liara was afraid the attempt would end badly—either in a botched transfer from the Normandy to Harbinger, or from Harbinger to the clone. “I fail to see the reasoning for allowing Harbinger to remove you from the Normandy, Rachaél. I just don’t think it necessary to give Harbinger access to … you!”

Shepard’s expression was unreadable as she thought about Liara’s objections. She finally responded with, “This isn’t something Miranda can do without Harbinger’s intervention, Liara. As I understand it, the original program to bring me back to life after Alchera required a number of leaps in bio-engineering techniques; Miranda admitted that there were a large number of Reaper derived implants throughout my body, particularly in the cloned replacement parts the Cerberus doctors grafted onto me. Hell, even my eyes were artificial, not too unlike Jack Harper’s.”

“I still don’t like it, Rachaél. I don’t believe Harbinger has told us everything.”

“Lies of omission, Blue?” Shepard’s projection paced the length of the Med Bay. “You may be correct, but I really don’t see any alternative. By all rights, I should have died when I leaped into that energy beam … my physical shell did die. The clone … my clone, seems like the best chance I have of rejoining you in the physical realm.”

Liara sighed, knowing the commander well enough to realize that once she had made a decision on a course of action, there was little that would turn her aside. “Okay, Rachaél. It is your life we’re talking about, and I can understand not wanting to live in a computer core for an indeterminate amount of time. I love you … unconditionally, and I will support you in whatever way I am able.”
“Thanks, Liara. That means a lot. I love you too … and I hope I can demonstrate my love for you, physically, without having to employ Edie to literally hold your hand to keep your mind anchored in the real world.”

♦ INSIDE HARBINGER’S MAIN INTERFACE CHAMBER ♦

As Miranda looked around inside this dimly lit chamber, her omnitool activated with an incoming text. Upon inspection, she was not surprised to see it was from their host, informing her that he believed it more efficient to send instructions or answers to queries through her omnitool. She could reply in the same manner, or simply vocalize her questions or replies.

He first directed her attention to a pair of cables coiled on the far side of the chamber. »One will provide continuous power to the life pod; the other will be my interlink for transfer of programming.«

As Tali’Zorah and Ken Donnelly carefully moved the stasis pod in from the landing pad outside, Miranda said, “Place the pod over there …” indicating the location with a wave of her hand. “The power interface cables are already in place, Mr Donnelly. Set the foot of the pod a half-meter from the bulkhead so I can move completely around it, then plug the power cable in … just the power cable, understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

When the pod was placed to her satisfaction, Donnelly inspected the plug on the power cable from Harbinger to confirm it would fit before deftly disconnecting the cable from the power cells; he quickly inserted the cable plug that would keep the pod’s life support functions active, waited until the lights switched from flashing yellow to steady green, then placed the portable power supply units beside the hatch before heading back to the landing pad and the waiting shuttle.

“Harbinger …” Miranda said. “The pod is in place and powered. Is there anything else I need to do?”

»You will need to connect the interface cable before Shepard-Normandy’s essence can be transferred to the clone.«

“Tali?” Miranda directed the quarian to locate the receptacle on the pod while she moved to stand at the coiled cable. Inspecting the plug confirmed that it was a purely optical device … judging from the size of the plug, it had the capability of moving a massive amount of data in a short time.

“The cable plug needs to go here, Specialist Lawson.” Tali had discovered a receptacle on the pod’s left side, just under the belt rail, hidden by a close-fitting cover. “It looks as if the Illusive Man had some information about what might be needed in the future.”

Lawson shook her head as she replied, “Fucking bastard usually prepared for every conceivable eventuality; I guess that’s a good thing, for us.” Uncoiling the cable as she moved, she handed the plug to Tali and waited while she made the connection. As the plug slid into the socket, a panel in the lid below the top-mounted viewport slid into its pocket to reveal an apparent interface of multi-colored lights. Miranda suddenly realized she had seen a report of something similar in appearance many months before, when Shepard had awakened Javik; this pod was eerily similar to the stasis pod that had been a Prothean’s sleep chamber for 50,000 years. “Dammit, Harbinger! Were the Reapers responsible for the design of the Prothean stasis pods?”

»We were not, Lawson-Specialist. A high probability exists that the Illusive Man used the technology discovered on Ilos to build this pod and others like it on Lazarus Station.«
Miranda looked at the pod with eyes newly opened by this revelation. *Son of a bitch must have been right behind Shepard at every turn during her search for Saren,* she thought. *He never said anything about this! I always assumed the design of the pods came from Cerberus engineers.*

“Are we done here, Specialist?” Tali had moved to stand beside Lawson as the former Cerberus operative thought about Shepard’s actions from before the campaign against the Collectors.

With a small start, Miranda looked at the quarian; placing a hand momentarily on her shoulder before turning to walk towards the open hatch and the landing platform, she replied, “I believe so, Tali. Let’s return to the ship; I need to speak with Shepard.”

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**MINUTEMAN STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA**

Yuán Xiùlán and her team had returned to the *Hong Kong* after downloading nearly all the saved research and design data from the servers on board the station. Once she was aware of how much data there was, Xiùlán had opted to download it onto multiple OSD’s; as a safeguard against any malicious code that might be buried within the data files, she planned to have Miranda sort through them on an isolated server when the former Cerberus operative was back on board.

Activating her comlink, she called for Lieutenant Cross to set a course for the Lazarus Research station. “Cut moorings and leave as soon as you’re ready, Lieutenant.”

After receiving a confirmation, she called to Asharru and Žiuk’Durmah to inform them the *Hong Kong* was returning to Lazarus. “Ţiuk’Durmah, since you have the shields and armor to withstand fire from capitol weapons, you may first wish to approach this station closer … let you confirm if I was successful in reprogramming the station VI to recognize Reapers as friendlies.”

> *I will do as you suggest, Yuán-Captain,* came the reply.  > *I will then proceed to Lazarus Station.*

Xiùlán nodded to herself as she stripped out of her armor and underclothing to shower before she ate dinner; she felt especially tired. It had been a long day.

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**NORMANDY · CONFERENCE ROOM**

Miranda sat at the far end of the long table, going over her notes concerning the reconstruction—what most would call a resurrection—of Commander Shepard, after her body had been retrieved from the frozen wastes of Alchera. It appeared that the only implant Rachaël’s clone would require would be the Reaper enhanced bio-amp that had been used for her original reconstruction—all the rest of her implants had been needed to augment the cloned attachments, such as her legs and lower arm.

This clone would be different, in that many of the implants needed before would not be necessary this time. The Illusive Man had been unwavering in requiring that Shepard be more than capable of fighting Collectors or Reaper creatures when she was revived in 2185; even though Miranda seriously doubted Rachael would ever need to fight again … she would need to discuss this aspect of Shepard’s new life with her … before she was transferred into the clone.

After reviewing the notes taken by Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton’s squad during their exploration of level fifteen, she was certain that a compatible amp existed among the several discovered by Sergeant Bates’ Red team during their sweep through the labs. Miranda sent a note to Patton’s
omnitool requesting a quick meeting. While she waited for Patton, Miranda voiced a request towards the ceiling. “Commander Shepard … I need to speak with you in the Conference Room.”

Shepard’s projection appeared at the end of the table closest to the security checkpoint formerly manned by Westmoreland and Campbell. “What may I do for you, Miranda?”

“Are you ready to leave the computer for the real world, Rachaél?”

A smile was Shepard’s response, followed by, “That would be nice, Miranda.”

Miranda smiled in return as the security hatch opened to reveal Patton, who stepped into the passage beside the conference room, only to stop outside the door.

Miranda said to Shepard as she waved Patton into the room, “As soon as I have a functioning bioamp, we can have Harbinger initiate the transfer process.” Turning to Patton, she activated her omnitool. “Master Guns, the data I’m sending is for an amp Sergeant Bates’ team uncovered during their sweep of part of level fifteen. If it’s not too much trouble, can you have him and his squad recover it, along with any others they found in that lab?”

Patton smiled at the specialist as she replied, “Is that the only thing you need from there, Ms Lawson? There was a huge amount of tech on that level, most of which I never would have guessed existed.”

“That will do it for now … We’ll probably retrieve more once this operation is done, before we all head back to our system.” Miranda stood from her chair as Patton nodded and left. As Miranda walked past the table to approach the projection, Shepard appeared to cross her arms. “The clone doesn’t have a bioamp already in place?”

Miranda frowned slightly and shook her head. “The plan was for the clones to only get their amps as each was activated, so they would have the very latest technology. Even with the months this station has been abandoned, I’m not aware of any amps currently available that are as refined and capable as the ones we’re retrieving, Rachaél; unlike those available commercially, these were created to complement your physiology. As an example, they wouldn’t work near as well for me as the implant I currently possess.”

Rachaél asked, “So, I’ll have the same biotic capabilities as before?”

“Exactly. Maybe even better. The plan was always to replace your amp with ones bearing the technical improvements our … uh, that is … Cerberus scientists developed while you ran the campaign against the Collectors.” Miranda looked down at the deck for a few moments before raising her head again; looking directly at Rachaél’s image, she added, “Unfortunately, you turning your back on the Illusive Man kind of shot that plan all to hell.

“We had more pressing issues to deal with, especially since the Reapers were already on the move. I bought us some time in the Viper Nebula, only to have it wasted when the Alliance arrested me. I almost wish I’d left that relay intact … wouldn’t have the lives of all those batarians on my conscience.”

“You did what needed to be done, Rachaél,” Miranda replied, a tone of sadness in her voice. “There were some in the galaxy that took your warnings to heart. Those that didn’t? Nothing you did or did not do would have made a damned bit of difference to those unable to accept the truth.” After pausing for a moment, she said, “There’s another aspect to this I need to discuss with you. When we brought you back before, many of the Reaper-enhanced implants were there to boost your physical abilities, beyond what most humans are capable of doing. Do you realize you were every bit as
“It’s true. When you punched Zaeed Massani for starting the fires in that refinery on Zorya, you nearly took his head off … you probably would have if you had thought to enhance the punch with biotics. I’ll send a list to Patton’s team, ask them to retrieve the components.” Miranda smiled as she continued, “You will remember this conversation when you’re physically up and around. The implants are not difficult to insert and activate … healing time is minimal, and the choice this time will be yours. So, are you ready to leave the Normandy, Rachael?”

“I’m afraid, Miranda … afraid of the process, of becoming part of another machine. I don’t like not being in control. But … if everything’s ready, then I guess we should get started. You need to go to the server compartment. I’ll have Liara and Edie meet me there.” Before the specialist could reply, Shepard’s projection swirled and disappeared.

Miranda had taken her time getting here from Deck Two, knowing that Shepard would be saying her farewells to Liara and Edie. When she entered the compartment from the Med Bay, the three were standing together at the far end; they all looked around at the sound of the hatch opening.

Miranda began speaking as she walked up to Liara and Edie. “Shepard, if you’re ready to leave the server, ask Harbinger to begin the transfer. I will wait here until he confirms your transit has been a success.”

Shepard looked to Liara, then Edie, then back to Liara. “I really wish I could give each of you a hug … since that’s not possible, you’ll have to hug each other for me.”

Tears came to Liara’s eyes as she embraced the hybrid woman in front of her before turning back to Shepard’s projection. “Go with the Goddess, Rachael.”

With a nod of her head, Shepard said quietly, “Okay, Harbinger … Let’s do this.”

A solemn reply echoed softly through the compartment: Initiating transfer.

Liara, Edie and Miranda watched with a mixture of hope and unhappiness as Shepard’s projection instantly vanished. The process had begun.

Rachael could not feel pain in the sense that an organic could, but the rapidity with which she had been pulled from the Normandy server banks caused extreme disorientation, similar and at the same time much worse than her foray into the geth server on Rannoch. This time, instead of a uniform green creating a solid, discernible path, her senses were overwhelmed with millions of colors, silently exploding and swirling around her in nauseating patterns totally foreign to anything she had ever seen. She tried to cry out, but could make no noise, nor could she block her sight as she was carried along in a maelstrom of data clusters, the record of her involuntary existence in a foreign world.

Where all in the Normandy’s servers had been white in the beginning, only to be gradually changed to shades of red by her presence over time, the areas before her quickly became devoid of any color or texture, resolving into a dull, monotone shade of grey. The impression of being moved came to an abrupt halt; her attempt to look at her surroundings met with failure. The sensation of panic began.
settling into her thoughts; the oppressive grey of her surroundings reinforcing the thought that she was suffocating, which only served to emphasize the panic she was feeling.

Just as she felt she could endure no more, she heard a voice … compassionate … caring … concerned; it was accompanied by a dim light in the surrounding greyness. Harbinger spoke to her … not as a superior intellect, but as an equal. »Shepard-Human. I have completed the transfer of your spirit from Shepard-Normandy.«

Rachaél fought down the panic as she tried to think of a way to reply. Harbinger’s voice was soothing. »Your thoughts are as loud to me as if you were shouting. I perceive all. You have no secrets within my structure, Shepard-Human. Simply think of what you wish to say … I will receive your thoughts as if you gave voice to them. Do not be afraid, Shepard-Human. I will allow no harm to befall you in this place.«

Long ago, when she still had human form, Rachaél had been instructed by Liara in how to compartmentalize a portion of her mind, so that she could have a private place that would not be shared with her lover. She had not needed this refuge since the death of her human form in the energy stream generated by the Crucible; she now realized that having a refuge for her most private thoughts was desirable. Thinking, [Harbinger. How long am I to be held in here? It almost feels as if I am a prisoner, stripped of my privacy. Are you going to monitor every thought I have?]

»You are not a prisoner in this place, Shepard-Human. It is … odd … to have your presence within my memory core. I have isolated you to a small section for your own safety. The vastness of my memory core is to your mind what the vastness of the galaxy is to the Normandy. I do not wish for you to stumble upon my memories of what you would perceive as atrocities committed during past harvests.«

Harbinger’s thoughts on this subject almost felt like … guilt. Shepard had memories of her special times with Liara isolated; she needed to know how much of her mind this construct could actually see. [Harbinger. I have a special relationship with Liara T'Soni. Are you able to see my memories of all our times together?]

After several moments that seemed an eternity to Shepard, the construct responded with »There seems to be a block on a small section of your memories. Any attempt to override that would, in all likelihood, damage you in ways I am unable to foresee.«

Rachaél would have smiled if she had physical form. “I would consider it a personal favor if you did not attempt to see past the … block, as you call it.”

»You are The Shepard … I … we … have sworn to restore you to a physical life. Standby.« After a short delay, the words she had been waiting to hear were spoken. »Lawson-Specialist is ready. The cloned body is still in stasis. Your essence will be transferred into the mind of this clone as the stasis field is terminated. Lawson-Specialist will revive the cloned body as your essence takes over the cloned mind, which has only rudimentary functions, such as for autonomic physical functions. Your mental connection with this construct … with me … will be terminated.« This last sentence held a hint of sadness.

[Harbinger. Your words have the feeling of unhappiness. Why?]

»Shepard-Human. It has been … an honor, to be able to share my memory core with you, even if for only a fleeting instant. I never experienced such during a … «

After several seconds of silence, Rachaél prompted the construct to continue. [...] During a what,
Affirmative, Shepard-Human. Before your intervention, there was only hibernation and harvest. It is a curious feeling to now have a different purpose. After a brief pause, Harbinger continued, It is known to me that there are other cloned bodies in stasis on the station. What is to become of them? I don’t know. I don’t believe the question has come up. Why do you need to know?

I am capable of storing anything, Shepard-Human. I submit it is possible for me to retain an exact copy of your essence, just as if it were a backup. There is room in the chamber for the stasis pods housing the cloned copies of your original self, and they will be safer within my structure than in a severely damaged Cerberus space station. Should you become a victim of an unfortunate accident...

Harbinger left the thought hanging, waiting for a reaction. Rachaël attempted to calm her emotions. Am I to remain here forever, Harbinger? That would absolutely drive me insane! I’m barely holding it together now as is, do you realize that? I was not created as you were—a machine version of a Leviathan. Your life has continued for what, millions? Billions of years? My mind has a difficult time contemplating living past my normal lifespan of a hundred to a hundred and fifty years.”

You would be unconscious of the passage of time, Shepard-Human. Your essence would be placed in stasis, safe within my memory core. The lifetime you envision would be as the passage of a micro-second for me. Harbinger had saved his most convincing argument for last. T’Soni-Specialist; Shadow Broker … She is bound to you by a promise, to love you until the end of your life, or hers. You are bound to her by the same promise. I submit that she will outlive you simply because of her biology. Would she wish to spend so much time alone … without you?

Shepard responded, I believe that my one lifetime—and I realize this will be my third life, Harbinger, but it will still be only one lifetime to Dr T’Soni—will be enough to satisfy her … after a brief pause, Rachaël continued in a tone tinged with regret, … although I probably won’t be around long enough for us to have any offspring together. Once I have been restored to full physicality, I will discuss this with Liara. If our decision is for me to have only one life, will you then delete the copy of my essence from your server?

Harbinger’s ‘voice’ sounded regretful, mixed with reluctant acquiescence. Compromise. The local copy will be … deleted, as you say … at the time of your death from natural causes, Shepard-Human. The clones still in stasis at that time will be terminated. Neither the copy of your essence nor the clones will be aware of my actions; all will simply … cease … to exist. Will that be satisfactory, Shepard-Human?

Rachaël had to think this plan through. She understood the construct’s reluctance to completely eliminate her presence from his memory core. Another thought came to her as she was considering his proposal … at once chilling and ghoulish. Harbinger, will you swear to me that you will not independently resurrect a clone to act in the guise of Rachaël Anne Shepard for any purpose you may deem useful to the Repositories? You must realize I didn’t choose synthesis on a whim. If some dire need presents itself during my lifetime, you do understand I will assist you if I am able?

Shepard-Human … Rachaël. You have my solemn vow that you will be the only living, breathing example of yourself in existence in this galaxy. Harbinger paused for several moments before continuing. T’Soni-Specialist; Lawson-Specialist; Chakwas-Doctor have arrived in the chamber occupied by the cloned body. Lawson-Specialist wishes to speak with you. I have made the necessary connections to enable you to converse with her.
mind and through the feedback loop created by the microphone in the chamber. ➞You may speak with Shepard-Human, Lawson-Specialist.«

Miranda’s voice ‘sounded’ tinny through Harbinger’s audio. ➞Shepard? Are you ready to live in the physical world again?«

[Ready as I’ll ever be, Miranda. If this all fails somehow, please say a prayer for my soul.]

It made sense, yet Rachaél was surprised to discover she could hear with Harbinger’s acuity … and she heard Liara draw a sudden sharp breath at her words. Shepard remained quiet as Miranda spoke with Karin and Liara to confirm they were ready to begin. The group fell silent for several moments, before Miranda raised her voice and stated, “Harbinger … begin the transfer.”

Shepard’s world exploded once again as the uniform, dull-grey world she was in was transformed into an endlessly swirling, seemingly nauseating multitude of patterns, just as she’d experienced during her original transfer into Harbinger’s memory core. Whereas before, she’d not felt pain; this time, she was choking, freezing cold, seemingly blinded by brightness and deafened by sound.

She was coughing, trying to clear air passages partially clogged from disuse. She felt pressure … hands? … on her shoulders (shoulders?) and back and under her head (I have a head … and arms?) She was on her side, face being held by caring hands as she coughed, nearly gagging on the unfamiliar feel of thick moisture in her lungs and trachea (internal organs?)

When the spasm had passed, she could feel her body lying on its side, head supported by a firm pillow. She was shaking … no, shivering! A voice said, “Cover her! She’s freezing!” A feeling of something – cloth? … being spread over her, covering the bare skin of her legs, hips, torso and arms, up to her neck. Another covering was added, this one blessedly warm, as if pre-heated. She reveled in the comforting warmth, silently thanking whoever had covered her.

More pressure—hands, carefully stroking her head, fingers working their way through—hair! (I have hair?) Sensations she had not experienced in many months overwhelmed her mind. She felt … moisture, running down her cheek. That same voice again, one she recognized as if from another, distant life. “By the Goddess, Miranda! She’s weeping!” It was true. All the sensations she was experiencing … (Damn! I have weight! I can feel my … body, pressing into a mattress!) … seemed beyond overwhelming. She slowly, almost painfully drew her knees up to her chest, unconsciously assuming a fetal position as tears continued to leak from under closed eyelids. Feeling displaced air in front of her, she struggled to force one eyelid open slightly; it was enough … just enough to see a pair of sparkling blue eyes, alight with love and hope, gazing back at her from mere centimeters away. “Rachaél? Wake up, Siame. Harbinger has restored your spirit … your very essence. Please … We’ve been apart for so long. It’s …”

With vocal cords suffering the same malaise as the rest of her body, Rachaél coughed, then croaked out, “Hey, Blue …”

Liara’s blue eyes instantly filled with tears of happiness as the asari placed a hand over her mouth. After a moment, the hand, trembling with excitement, cupped Rachaél’s cheek as she said, “Thank the Goddess! I never dreamed … never dared to hope that I would be able to hold you once again, Rachaél. My prayers have been answered.” The tears were flowing freely now, running unchecked down both her cheeks as an ecstatic Liara T’Soni caressed the face of her future bondmate.

Karin Chakwas placed a hand on Liara’s shoulder as she looked past Shepard and said, “I think we can take Shepard back to the Normandy, don’t you, Specialist?”

Another voice Rachaél recognized replied, “We’ll need a litter to take her out of here, Karin. Please
send a request for Lieutenant Morse to bring a couple of med techs over. We need to transfer her to the Med Bay so we can insert her new bio amp, along with the rest of the implants she needs."

Rachaël struggled to form words. “Har … Harbin … ger. Need … to talk.”

A voice, at once ancient and new, replied. *There will be time for conversation when you are once again on your feet, Shepard-Human.*

“Wait! Mi … ri. Need to … bring … pods …”

Miranda came around to stand with Liara; looking at Shepard, she asked, “What pods, Rachaël? The other stasis pods?”

Harbinger supplied the answer. *I have discussed this with Shepard-Human. Miranda-Specialist, you may bring the rest of the stasis pods into this chamber – I will provide the power necessary to maintain the clones as they are. Lazarus Station is broken. They will be lost if they are not removed from there.*

She was unsure as to when or how this new development had come to be, but Miranda was accustomed to making decisions on the fly and quickly changed her look of surprise into a look of determination as she took action. “I will speak with Captain Cody and Captain Yuán. They will assign crewmembers for the retrieval and relocation of the remaining pods as soon as possible. Thank you, Harbinger.”

♦ NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY ♦

Miranda Lawson leaned against the window wall looking out on the ship’s mess area; she had been without sleep for nearly twenty-two hours, and was having difficulty focusing as a result. Having been brought here from the stasis pod Lawson had deactivated and opened, Rachaël was sound asleep on her side; Liara T’Soni was sleeping on the med bed as well, her nude body pressed so closely to Shepard’s back that, from a distance, they looked like a single being. Bringing Shepard’s body back to life had proved relatively simple, particularly when Harbinger had dropped Rachaël’s essence into her newly awakened brain.

Lawson was massaging her temples when Karin walked into the compartment; seeing the specialist nearly asleep on her feet prompted Dr Chakwas to say, “Miranda, the *Hong Kong* has returned from Minuteman Station. Go down to the hanger while I call Lieutenant Morse … She can take you back so you can sleep in your own bed … for at least twelve hours. I’ll keep an eye on Rachaël.” Seeing the protest forming on her lips, Karin added, “Don’t make me turn my request into a doctor’s order, Specialist. Go.”

Miranda smiled at the woman’s ‘stern doctor’ act as she wordlessly pushed away from the wall and headed for the exit. As the hatch opened, she turned and started to speak, only to receive a shooing motion from Karin, which she quietly obeyed.

After sending a text to Lieutenant Morse, Karin moved to stand beside Rachaël’s bed, where she took a number of status readings with her omnitool. It had been an amazing day. If everything continued to go as planned, Rachaël Shepard would be back, seemingly from the dead. The woman was like a housecat—she apparently possessed nine lives, of which she had used two in the fight with the Collectors and the war with the Reapers. *I pray she doesn’t need to use any more.*

She turned at the sound of the hatch opening; Edie walked into the med bay, coming to a halt at the foot of Shepard’s bed. “How is she doing, Doctor?”
“Everything looks normal, Edie … I really hope her physical condition continues to improve. Having spent several years in cryo-stasis, the human body needs time to get used to being active once again. As for her … life-force … her essence … have you checked the ship’s computer, Edie? Is her electronic persona completely … gone?”

“I can find no trace of Rachaël Shepard in the computer core. It’s as if she never resided within the server.” Edie’s expression turned contemplative. “The empty memory core segments feel … strange.”

A surprised Karin asked, “Strange? In what way?”

“I had become used to her constant presence. It was as if we had never lost her to the war. Now, the emptiness is … somewhat depressing … to me, anyway.” Edie walked to the other side of the bed on which Rachaël and Liara were sleeping. Bending down from the waist, the bio-mechanical woman minutely inspected the totally relaxed face of this person. Returning to a standing position, Edie quietly observed, “It is difficult to process, Doctor. The face is that of Rachaël Shepard, right down to the freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks. It’s almost as if she never joined with the energy stream generated by the Crucible.”

Karin laughed lightly, saying, “I can tell you with absolute certainty, Edie, the human on that table is Rachaël Shepard, beyond any doubt.”

“Is Dr T’Soni going to stay on board?”

“That’s a good question, Edie. Her former quarters have been taken over by the ship’s XO, and Captain Cody is in possession of Shepard’s former quarters on Deck One. I seriously doubt there are even any clothes on board she can wear.”

“Ship’s stores will have a selection of generic duty uniforms she can wear,” Edie responded. “As for accommodations, perhaps the port cargo bay on Deck Four could be repurposed as living quarters for Rachaël and Dr T’Soni.”

Karin smiled as she replied, “Sounds like an excellent suggestion, Edie. I’ll speak with Lieutenant Commander Adams first thing in the morning.”

A/N: There is much more to come … once I started on Shepard’s reanimation, the words just continued to flow. My sincere thanks for the enormous amount of assistance from Desert Sunrise.
We have calcium in our bones, iron in our veins, carbon in our souls, and nitrogen in our brains. 93 percent stardust, with souls made of flames, we are all just stars that have people names — Nikita Gill

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Mo cheann geallta – My promised one (Gaelic)
OSD – Optical Storage Device, analogous to compact data disks of the early twenty-first century
Siame – “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

(SSV NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY)

Shepard woke up slowly. Moving only her eyes, she began looking about the darkened Med Bay; feeling the presence of someone next to her, she looked down to her left, where she discovered the love of her life cuddled up beside her, head resting on her shoulder. Tears of happiness welled up in her eyes. To have been given this chance, this third chance at happiness, was a gift from the gods. She brought her right arm over her stomach; reaching down, she softly caressed the muscular thigh casually lying across her hips, lower leg bent at the knee, foot resting between her legs. A small groan of pleasure escaped from between blue lips … the lips Rachaël had longed to kiss for so many months while trapped in the Normandy’s computer core. The asari lying beside her stiffened all over as she tensed her muscles in a stretch akin to a feline.

“Good morning, Siame,” came a whispered greeting, so soft it almost couldn’t be heard. “How did you sleep?”

Shepard was still getting used to again having a larynx and a mouth with which to speak; as the apparatus had been in stasis for so long, her voice was still a bit gravelly, and it took no small amount of concentration to say anything at all, although she was continuing to improve. “Very well. It’s amazing what having your body … your skin, next to mine, does for my peace of mind. I could get very used to this, Blue.”

Liara raised her head to gaze into the loving eyes of her promised. “Goddess be praised! That’s wonderful, Rachaël! But you must remember that this is the way we always slept, during the war? Skin-on-skin, my love … it’s what helped us remain so connected to each other.” Liara studied the eyes before her, wanting reassurance that Shepard’s memories were truly intact, as Harbinger had promised.

“Absolutely, Liara … But remembering while a digital projection does not equate to enjoying the actual sensations of you being snuggled up to me. I never dreamed we’d have this chance; I’m simply saying I want to make sure we don’t lose it again.

Liara rolled slightly up on her left side, freeing Shepard’s left arm and hand to caress her back. Shivering slightly at the feelings of wanton lust brought on by fingers softly trailing in the valleys of her lower back ridges, she planted her mouth on Shepard’s, using her tongue to tease a like response from this human, as if months had not separated them and Rachaël’s newly acquired body hadn’t just been released from cryo-stasis.

Shepard moaned with pleasure; she had dreamed of this reunion for as long as she had been trapped in the server. Having Edie as a go-between so she and Liara could be together had just possibly
been the only pleasure she had experienced, but it wasn’t physical pleasure for Rachaël, and paled in comparison to having this beautiful person actually next to her, smooth pale skin touching pebbled blue.

Liara released her lips as the hatch segments at the far end retracted, allowing Dr. Chakwas to reenter her domain. Liara grinned devilishly as she reached down to pull the sheet over her bare back.

“Ah, we’re both awake, I see.” Karin had seen Liara’s move to recover her bare backside, but made no comment … It was simply wonderful to see the happiness in the asari’s eyes at having Rachaël back in the physical world. Applying her omnitool to render the rest of the glass wall opaque—the sections immediately behind Shepard’s bed already were—she said cheerily, “I have some clothes for the commander. Time to get dressed, Rachaël, see if you can walk on your own.”

Liara took this as a cue to sit up; she turned her back to Karin after swinging bare legs down to stand beside the med bed, where she retrieved and began pulling on her own clothes.

Shepard struggled to raise her body to a sitting position, prompting a concerned Karin to place a hand on her back to assist her. Helping her swing her legs over the edge, the doctor shook her head, a bit of awe evident in her voice as she examined Rachaël’s nude torso. “Your skin is completely unblemished, my dear.”

Liara moved to examine Shepard’s bare back. “Same on her back, Doctor. And that’s remarkable because …?”

“In the time she fought the Collectors, then Reaper creatures and Cerberus, she was wounded, numerous times, sometimes seriously so. Some of my best work used to be visible all over, but now?” She waved a hand at Rachaël’s chest. “No signs she was ever wounded, which I guess is as it should be with a brand new body.”

Grabbing a pair of socks, she crouched in front of a pair of lower legs with the muscular calves of someone that had formerly done a lot of running while carrying 29 to 30 Kg of armor and equipment. Looking up at Shepard’s face, Karin said, “There’s no reason I can think of that your legs should be so well developed.” As she pulled socks onto her feet, she mused, “Cerberus must have enhanced your body as they were … growing it. I wonder …” Standing again, she used her hands to examine Shepard’s thighs. “Remarkable. It would appear Cerberus used your original body as a model for the musculature on this … cloned body. Your DNA would not make your muscles so defined … that can only happen through conditioning, strength training.”

Wrapping an arm around Rachaël’s waist, she said, “Come on; let’s get you on your feet.” Shepard scooted forward with Karin’s help and slid her naked butt off the edge of the med bed. Karin shook her head slightly as she looked at Shepard’s bare torso and arms, but made no further comment. As Rachaël stood on her feet for the first time in many months, she swayed slightly before finding her equilibrium; handing a pair of panties to her, Karin stood by to steady her as she bent and inserted first one foot, then the other into the leg holes. Pulling the underpants up as she straightened, she smiled at Karin and snarked, “First time I’ve had to put on clothes since I fired the Crucible.”

Karin handed Rachaël the rest of the clothes she’d brought up from stores; as Captain Cody had shipped all her possessions to the apartment at the Citadel, Karin had brought up generic clothing in her size. Shepard ignored the bra after comparing it to her breasts. “Damned Illusive Man,” she muttered. “Bastard had a thing for women with big boobs … guess he had the scientists tweak my DNA to produce these,” she said as she experimentally cupped them in her hands. “A bit larger … and heavier … than I remember ‘em.”

Choosing to pull the undershirt on without confining her breasts, she then pulled on the pair of utility
pants Karin had brought up. “… a bit tight in the butt,” was her only comment, before pulling on the N7 hoody that Liara had kept. Looking down at herself, she raised her arms while slowly turning in an unsteady circle, prompting Karin to steady her as she modeled for a smiling Liara. “What do you think, T’Soni? Not too bad, huh?”

Dr Chakwas smiled as well, saying, “Okay … time for breakfast.”

With Liara holding Rachaél’s elbow to steady her, the trio left the Med Bay for the Crew’s Mess area, where a corporal had just ladled out several bowls of hot cereal. Liara poured herself a small pitcher of hot water, added a mug of fresh coffee and took a tray to the table where Rachaél was sitting. Giving Rachaél the coffee, she filled two mugs with water for tea and gave the second mug to Karin before retrieving bowls of cereal for the three of them. Finally, she grabbed several eezo infused snack bars from an overhead cupboard; returning to the table, she handed two of them to Rachaél.

“Why do I need these,” she asked.

“You’re still a biotic, Shepard. Miranda inserted your new bioamp shortly after you were brought here from Harbinger. She says it’s still cutting edge, way beyond what the commercial manufacturers are capable of producing.” Picking up another bar, she unwrapped it and took a bite. “You need to have a pretty high level of eezo in your blood and the … cloned body … had only maintenance levels … just enough to keep you from shock. So eat one now, and have the other in a couple of hours. We’ll have to set up a practice area for you down in the hanger bay. I expect the Illusive Man had his scientists enhance your biotic abilities as well … Your biotic capability is probably several degrees greater than your skills before the Crucible, which is saying something.”

Karin added, “I’ll add checking your eezo levels back to the program I use to monitor your blood chemistry. I don’t want to see you go into eezo shock before you even have a chance to use your biotics.” Taking a sip of tea, she added, “Soon as we’re done here, you two go back in the Med Bay; I have to attend a meeting with Cody, Adams, Captain Yuán and Miranda. Cody will probably want to speak with you when we’re done.”

Rachaél smiled briefly at Karin before putting her head down to apply herself to her cereal and coffee.

♦ NORMANDY · CONFERENCE ROOM ♦

Captain Bill Cody, Lieutenant Commander Greg Adams, Doctor Karin Chakwas, Captain Yuán Xiùlán and Specialist Miranda Lawson had convened in the ship’s Conference Room to discuss the events of the past week.

Cody was looking through the status reports concerning the remaining clones, as compiled by Specialists Traynor and Lawson. Waving the datapad in front of him, he said, “So, all the stasis pods have been relocated from Lazarus Station to the storage chamber within Harbinger.” Asking, “Were there any problems of which we need to be aware?”

Miranda’s answer was immediate. “None, Sir. Each pod is receiving stable power from Harbinger’s systems … the power source will keep the clones viable for another two centuries at least, but …” Miranda paused briefly before continuing. “… Harbinger has promised Shepard that the clones in cyber-storage, along with the copy of her essence in his memory core, will be … the word he used was ‘deleted’ … upon her death from natural causes, if … and only if, Liara does not wish to have a … replacement brought forth at that time. Shepard is still recovering from the transference process, along with healing from the implantation of her bioamp and several other electronic implants designed to give her a sense of being her old self again.”
Dr Chakwas was aghast. “Deleted? How in the name of all that’s holy does one go about deleting a human, Specialist Lawson? That has got to be one of the most callous things I’ve ever heard about the Reapers! I was in one of those pods the Collectors used for converting humans into organic goo … I could never imagine anything more horrific than being dissolved alive, but now? I think I may just lose my breakfast!” She snorted in disgust at the very idea.

Miranda’s face flushed with embarrassment. “He didn’t offer any details about the process, Doctor, but you need to remember these clones are unaware of their own existence. It’s nothing I care to contemplate either, but Harbinger’s promise may be more of a kindness than leaving them in a perpetually vegetative state.”

The expression on Karin’s face left no doubt about her feelings on the subject and the hint of nausea threatening to take over, but she didn’t comment further.

Adams wanted to know, “How much longer are we to remain docked inside this …” he raised his hands in the air over his head to indicate Harbinger, “… giant metal monster? I’d like to get the Normandy back into her element.”

Cody agreed, saying, “It would be nice to see stars through the viewports again.”

Miranda split her attention between the two officers, saying, “There is really no reason for us to remain docked here; Harbinger only needed physical contact with the Normandy in order to transfer Shepard from our computer into his own memory banks. We are free to leave at any time.”

Adams replied, “That sounds wonderful, Ms Lawson, but …” Greg paused as he mulled an idea around in his head. “Since the Normandy is already docked inside this mobile … carrier? … Let’s use that to our advantage … or, more correctly, to Dr T’Soni’s advantage. Ask Harbinger to allow Iringù-Eßizkur to enter and dock along with us. If Dr T’Soni is going to vacate her transport, wouldn’t it be easier for her to transfer all her personal gear while working in a shirtsleeves environment?”

Cody stroked his chin for a few moments as he thought about his XO’s suggestion. Coming to a decision, he replied, “May as well take advantage of our location. Greg, make the arrangements with both of them. Track Vakarian down while you’re at it … find out if he’d like to transfer his gear out of Iringù-Eßizkur at the same time.”

Dr Chakwas asked, “Where will Shepard stay once she’s released from my Med Bay?”

Adams provided the answer. “The port cargo compartment on Deck 4 is being reconfigured to serve as accommodations for Dr T’Soni, whom we assume will not be returning to Iringù-Eßizkur … accommodations will be for Shepard as well, since her quarters are now occupied by you, Sir.”

Shifting his gaze to Dr Chakwas, Adams continued with, “Karin suggested it, and I didn’t see any reason to not allow it.”

“Very good. I realize it’s probably too early to ask, but what will they do once we return to the Citadel?”

After a moment when no one spoke up, Miranda answered with, “Shepard still has an apartment in Tiberius Towers, Sir. It belonged to Admiral Anderson before the war … he gave it to her as a gift … claimed he was going to retire on Earth with Kaylee Sanders after the war.” Miranda continued speaking quietly as she looked down at the table, “Unfortunately for the admiral … and us, the war cost him … everything.”

Cody responded, “It cost Shepard everything as well, Specialist. It’s only thanks to the Reapers …
Harbinger … and Cerberus that she has been returned from an electronic shadow of her former self to a physical existence.” Thinking of Anderson’s death on the Crucible added a note of solemnity to the captain’s voice. “I had all of Shepard’s possessions from the loft taken to that apartment … there may even be some of T’Soni’s things mixed in.”

The silence in the room grew oppressive, as if each second was an hour. Captain Yuán coughed to clear her throat before speaking in a soft voice. “My team managed to retrieve a large cache of data from Minuteman Station, Miranda. As soon as you can return to the Hong Kong, I would like you to scrub through those files using the ship’s isolated server – see if you can discover any malicious code or software buried within the specs and designs we downloaded from those files.”

Miranda brightened visibly at that. “Of course. And you are right to be cautious of those files … no telling what surprises are in them. I’ll make certain there’s nothing buried in the code but data. Any idea what the files contain?”

Xiülán replied, “Design archives for the SR2, including sections with details of the ship’s interior layout. There are also designs for a smaller, ‘corvette-class’ ship and a much larger ‘cruiser’ style vessel, both of which appear to share the look and FTL capabilities of the Normandy. There are also specs for a new class of fighter/interceptor that could add tremendously to the Alliance’s fleet defensive capabilities.” Xiülán smiled grimly as she added, “Of course, with our newfound friends keeping watch over us, I sincerely doubt we’ll have much need for sophisticated fighters.”

Cody nodded in agreement before saying, “Okay then. Now that all the pods have been transferred, Xiülán can have Miranda return for a final inspection to make sure they’re all securely placed and properly powered. In the meantime, I’ll go meet with Shepard and T’Soni in the Med Bay.” As Greg rose to carry out his orders, Cody looked at Yuán and asked, “You heading back to the Hong Kong, Captain?”

As Miranda and Dr Chakwas left the conference room on Greg’s heels, she replied, “Shortly. With your permission, I’d like to speak privately with Specialist Traynor before I leave.”

Cody’s smile crinkled the skin beside his eyes. “I’ll send her in here when I pass by the CIC. Take all the time you need.”


He shook his head as he turned to leave. “As a habit, I don’t suppose that’s a bad one to have, Captain. We’ll talk later.”

Samantha Traynor walked down the short passage to the conference room and went inside. As soon as the door closed and sealed behind her, Xiülán waved her activated omnitool past the glass walls, which reacted by changing from clear to opaque.

When she saw this, Sammy hesitated only a moment before approaching Xiülán with arms outstretched to envelope her Inamorata in a hug. Yuán reciprocated, holding Sam tightly for several seconds. With a chaste kiss on the cheek, Xiülán released Sammy and stepped back. “Damn, I’ve really missed that! Are we ever going to be able to take leave together again?”

Xiülán bade Sammy to sit as she retook her own chair. Sitting side-by-side, slightly facing each other with knees touching, Traynor replied, “I hope we can, and sooner rather than later, Luv. So, what did you need to talk to me about?”
“Your future … on this ship, and in the Alliance,” Yuán responded.

Traynor felt as if her heart had turned to lead and fallen into her stomach. “Why? What ’ave I done …? What ’ave you heard?”

Xiùlán reached for and took Sammy’s hands. “Calm down, Sà mǐ, please. This is just me, not the captain of the Hong Kong, okay? We’re friends … hell, more than friends. It’s nothing you have done or I have heard … I just want to place an idea in your head, nothing more.”

Traynor immediately felt better, but was still nervous. “What idea, Ai?”

Xiùlán gave Sammy’s hands a reassuring squeeze as she replied, “Just this: I know you worked with Liara T’Soni as her assistant before she and Garrus boarded Iringù-Eßizkur to set out for the Traverse … Hell, you helped set up all the equipment inside that Reaper.”

“Repository, darling,” Traynor gently corrected. “I think they’re continuously listening to what we say … what we talk about.”

Xiùlán’s smile became a thin, straight line as her face took on a somber expression. “You didn’t see all the destroyed ships around Earth, Sà mǐ, or the torn up bodies and body parts—human, turian, asari, krogan—floating in orbit around the planet.” Yuán looked down at their joined hands as she fought to keep her emotions in check. Swallowing hard, she looked back up at her lover and continued. “I’m very confident that Dr T’Soni will want to stay with Commander Shepard now that she’s free of this ship’s computer … something which I can certainly understand.” The look she gave Traynor spoke volumes about how she sympathized with Shepard and T’Soni.

“So, what are you saying, Xiùlán?” Honey brown eyes looked intently into those of sable brown as she waited for a reply.

“I want you to think about what it will mean for Dr T’Soni to walk away from her position as the premier information broker in the galaxy. You’re a trained infiltrator, and I’ve never met anyone with so much talent at hacking computers and the systems to which they’re connected. Just saying, with your background … your training … you just may be the logical successor to Liara T’Soni.”

“You haven’t said anything to Dr T’Soni, have you?” Traynor’s expression displayed worry. “What you’re suggesting? … I’d have to resign my commission, if the Alliance would even accept it. And I’d need someone to ride along with me … no way in ’ell I’d take to the ’Verse all by myself, especially in a Repository.”

“I’ve not talked to anyone else concerning this, my love. As I said, it’s just a seed … to make you consider the possibilities … to think about your options. The way things are … all the chaos out there? A friendly information broker would be invaluable, particularly to the Alliance, and don’t forget the Galactic Council.”

Traynor nodded as she thought about everything Xiùlán had said. “I’m not going to make a move unless I hear something directly from Liara.” She stood to leave, prompting Xiùlán to stand as well; she surprised Sammy by once again throwing her arms around her in a tight embrace, and the passionate kiss Xiùlán planted on Sammy’s lips quite literally took the specialist’s breath away. When they broke for air, Traynor huffed, “You know I would kill to keep enjoying your company, Luv. Are we ever going to have time for just ourselves?”

“Probably not in the near term. Wǒ ài nǐ, sà mǐ! [我愛你，薩米！– I love you, Sami!] I wake up with your name on my lips and go to sleep thinking about you every day. Stay in touch with me,
Not trusting her voice, Sammy nodded as she held the face of her beloved.  *How did I get so damned lucky?* came the thought as she planted a kiss on a lightly freckled nose before turning and leaving the conference room.  Xiúlan followed slowly, thinking about their relationship and wishing there was more ‘together’ time available to them.

♦ NORMANDY · DECK THREE, MED BAY ♦

Cody passed his hand through the red-tinged Haptic lock blocking his entrance to the Med Bay, which was answered by a barely heard chime on the other side.  After a few moments, the lock’s color cross-dissolved into a brilliant green and the hatch sections noiselessly slid into their pockets.  Cody smiled as he looked at the unlikely pair inside with Dr Chakwas … Shepard and Dr T’Soni had been sitting together at Karin’s desk; all three rose from their chairs to greet the *Normandy’s* captain.

Cody held out his hand as he approached.  “Commander?  It’s good to see you.”  Shepard grinned as she clasped Cody’s hand.  “Certainly much nicer than as a disembodied apparition speaking to you over the QEC and visiting you in my former quarters.”  Rachael’s expression turned serious, her eyes clouded slightly as she thought about the previous few weeks.  “I can’t thank you enough for believing in me … and Liara.  To be standing here now, speaking with you, able to actually feel things, to once again …” here she looked at Liara, “… hold my *cheann geallta* in my arms.  You and your crew … as well as the captain and crew of the *Hong Kong* … have given us a priceless gift.”

Cody’s expression held a mixture of joy tinged with embarrassment.  “It was a privilege for me to have a small part in bringing you back, Shepard.  It was Liara’s persistence, along with that of her turian companion, that made all the difference.  If they hadn’t found the remains of Lazarus Station, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”  He looked at the deck beneath his feet for a moment before returning his gaze to the woman in front of him.  “And don’t forget Admiral Hackett … He green-lighted this expedition.  You’ll need to talk to him as soon as possible; we haven’t communicated with him regarding our success.”

Shepard nodded before saying, “If I may ask, where will Liara and I be staying until we’re back in the Widow System, Sir?  You have my old quarters, and we’ve been told that Greg Adams is now assigned to Liara’s old quarters.”  Cody’s expression held a mixture of joy tinged with embarrassment.  “We’re cleaning out the port side cargo compartment on Deck 4 … there’s plenty of space in there for both of you.”  Directing his attention to Liara, he added, “Greg is arranging for Iringù-Ebizkur to dock nearby, within Harbinger … as soon as that’s accomplished, you’ll be able to move your personal belongings.  Greg thought it’d be easier to make the move working in a shirtsleeve atmosphere.”  Liara was surprised.  “I never intended to remain as the Shadow Broker after the war ended; circumstances dictated otherwise.  What’s to become of all the equipment within Iringù-Ebizkur?”  Shepard touched her arm as she asked, “There’s still a need for the Shadow Broker, Blue.  Do you know anyone that could take over for you?”

“None immediately come to mind, Siame.  I’ll have to give it some thought.”

Cody looked at the pair and said, “I have to attend to a few other matters … Take your time moving
your gear, Dr T’Soni, and let Greg or myself know when you and Vakarian have everything you need off of Iringù-Eßizkur … I’d like to get the Normandy back into space under her own power.”

“Thank you, Captain … for everything,” Liara smiled.

♦ PORT SIDE CARGO COMPARTMENT, DECK FOUR ♦

Having returned with the last container of her belongings from Iringù-Eßizkur, Liara pushed the crate against the wall so it would be out of the way as much as possible in their relatively small space. Her consolation lay in the fact the situation was very temporary … only as long as it took them to get to the Citadel, and they would be enroute soon. Then, she and Shepard would leave the Normandy, probably for good.

She turned to face the back of the room to see Rachaél sitting at the workbench turned makeshift desk as she concluded what appeared to be an uncomfortable conversation with Admiral Hackett. Liara walked back and laid a hand gently on her lover’s shoulder, first because she could, and second, to let Shepard know she was there to support her, whatever the cause of her discomfiture.

Hackett’s expression lightened as the Asari came into view on his screen. “Ah, Dr T’Soni! Always a pleasure. You must be ecstatic to have Shepard back in the flesh, as are we all. Seeing as you’re back, I won’t keep Shepard any longer.” His gaze shifted back to the commander. “Think about what we discussed, Shepard. A promotion to Captain and your choice of ship in the entire fleet is no small thing. I’ll see you at the Citadel.”

“Aye-aye, Sir. See you there.” The screen went black, so Shepard stood and turned, wrapping her arms around Liara and pulling her close. “That could have gone better.”

“What do you mean? What happened?” Liara’s brow furrowed with concern, wondering exactly what the admiral wanted of Shepard now. It seemed to her that Hackett’s offer was extremely generous. “What’s wrong with a captaincy and your choice of ship? Did he exclude the Normandy from your choices?”

“No. He offered no specifics …” Rachaél reached up with her right hand to cup Liara’s cheek as she leaned in, closed her eyes and placed their lips gently together. The asari’s lips were soft and welcoming and her body seemed to melt against Shepard’s form, fitting perfectly against her in every possible way. Rachaél’s heart raced and the kiss lasted longer than she had intended, not wanting to ever give up those warm blue lips; they were finally forced to separate for that terribly inconvenient necessity of breathing.

Liara’s eyes stayed closed and her tongue ran slowly over her lower lip before she whispered, “I never thought to feel that again, Rachaél. It truly is a gift of the Goddess.”

“I agree, Liara … and it’s why Admiral Hackett isn’t very happy with me.” Shepard stepped back and took Liara’s hand, pulling her slowly toward the bed and sitting down on its edge while guiding the Asari to sit at her left side. “I know we haven’t talked about it yet, but …” heaving a sigh, she stated, “I’m done, Blue.” Rachaél squeezed Liara’s right hand as she continued, “I’m sure you agree that I’ve given more than enough for the cause … I have absolutely no desire to put the uniform back on, but Admiral Hackett disagrees. He says the Alliance still needs me.” She paused and shook her head. “The only thing I want is to sit back and simply enjoy our life … our time together. Is that so wrong?”

“Goddess, no! You’ll get no argument from me on that point, Rachaél.” A glowing smile lit Liara’s face and her eyes sparkled in joy. “I would love it! Where would we go?”
“Thessia, of course. Where else?” Shepard chuckled at the Asari’s sudden eagerness. “You’re Lady T’Soni and have a great house to run … Though, whenever you need a break or we simply want to take a vacation, I still have the awesome penthouse apartment on the Citadel. I see no reason to get rid of it.”

“That sounds lovely! But, I can see why Admiral Hackett is displeased; I imagine he doesn’t want to lose the services of the best officer in the Alliance, nor Earth’s Spectre representative.”

“I’m not so sure that will happen.” Shepard’s smile faded a bit. “I believe being a Spectre is a lifetime appointment. That’s one of the things Hackett wants to see me about on the Citadel; I’m not sure I can resign from the Spectres.” Her face took on a guilty look as she finished, “But I’m not sure I want to, either. I’ve been in the military since I was eighteen … and I’m not sure I could drop everything and be happy. I like that connection, and I’m proud of my service.” She looked sheepishly over at her future bondmate. “Would that be alright with you, Li? If I wanted to keep my Spectre appointment?”

“I love you, Rachaél, and will follow you anywhere.” Liara smiled softly and leaned over to place another kiss on Shepard’s lips. “If that means you remain a Spectre, then so be it. I cannot deny you a life of service if that is what your heart truly desires. It’s in your blood … and is the Rachaél Shepard I have come to know and love. That will never change, no matter your decision about whether or not to serve as a Spectre.”

The tension visibly rushed out of her body and a broad smile crossed Shepard’s face. “Thank you, Liara. You have no idea how much of a relief that is!”

Musical laughter filled their small space as Liara’s eyes twinkled with joy. “Of course I do, Shepard! How could I possibly have spent all this time with you and not understood your dedication to and love for the Alliance?”

“I know … but, still. Loving it and staying on active service are two completely different issues, especially after I seriously thought I was dead again, with no way for Miranda to bring me back this time … which does raise another issue we need to discuss.”

“Your plans for the remaining clones.” Liara’s eyes clouded. “I know, but I’m not ready to talk about that issue. Harbinger is taking care of them, so we have plenty of time to figure out what we’re going to do with them … I can’t bear to think about the need to use them. Not yet.” The asari looked beseechingly at her siame. “Please, Shepard. Can we wait to discuss this at a later time?”

“Of course.” Shepard pushed herself farther back onto the bed and gave Liara’s hand a tug. “There’s no hurry. We have a lot of catching up to do … and there’s no time like the present. Neither you nor I have any pressing obligations until we arrive at the Citadel …”

The shadow on the asari’s face vanished with the commander’s words and Liara eagerly scooted closer, lying down and pulling Shepard along with her. “I concur with that plan of action, Rachaél. I’ve missed you dearly.”

Shepard allowed her lover to pull her down … to a point. She rested on her forearm, hovering above the asari as she stared down into eyes of brilliant blue. Rachaél’s eyes misted as she spoke, reverence blatant in her tone, her voice husky with emotion. “I love you, Liara. There have been too many times over the last few years that I was convinced we’d never have this time. Between your injuries and mine, I honestly thought one of us would be dead before the war was over.”

Tears came to Liara’s eyes as the memories of Shepard’s death … deaths … sprang to the forefront of her mind. Her voice shook as she responded, “You did die, Shepard. Twice! We are so far
beyond the realm of what should have been possible, I simply have to believe in the intervention of
the Goddess, even though my scientific mind denies her … particularly after everything I learned
from Javik.”

Shepard smiled as she tenderly wiped the tears from her lover’s cheeks. “The gods and goddesses
work in mysterious ways, Liara. Who is to say it was not Athame who sent the Protheans, instead of
the other way around? The Protheans would not be the only race to claim the power of the divines
as a way to influence others.” She silenced any response by leaning in and claiming blue lips with
her own, her free hand slipping from Liara’s cheek to slide softly to the back of the asari’s neck,
caressing the sensitive folds beneath her fingertips.

Shepard felt Liara’s whole body quiver beneath her from the resultant sensations, the nerve receptors
in the asari’s neck feeling the welcome and enticing contact, her desire flaring the folds wide to grant
Rachaél easy access.

Blue hands clenched into fists, balling up the bed covers beneath them for only a moment before
shooting to Shepard’s sides, pulling the human down atop her. “Yes …” she exhaled. “Will you
meld with me, Rachaél?”

“You know you don’t need to ask that, Li. That has never changed.” Shepard’s voice was quiet,
whispering the response as she felt the heat building between their bodies. “But, before you do …”
Shepard’s hand came away from Liara’s neck and she pushed herself up to straddle the asari,
beginning to undo the buttons of Liara’s blouse. “… we need to get rid of everything that could
interfere with our bodily contact. Once we meld, I don’t want anything to break our connection …
for a very long while.”

Liara’s eyes blazed intensely as she reached up to start pushing Shepard’s shirt up as well, sitting up
and kissing the commander as they both shucked their shirts from their shoulders. Shepard slid off
the bed quickly, to undo her trousers and drop her pants to the floor, while Liara laid back to undo
her own, aided by Rachaél, who grasped the bottoms of her pants legs and quickly stripped them
away from the prone asari.

Shepard paused for a moment, standing silent as her eyes absorbed the beauty before her. They
hadn’t even really done anything yet, but her chest heaved and her heart beat ferociously in her chest,
as if she had just finished sprinting. Her eyes locked with Liara’s and they both smiled, Liara
suddenly coy under Rachaél’s scrutiny as Shepard moved slowly back to the bed, once more
straddling her lover. Her hands wandered slowly across supple scales, the sensations unusually
distinct; lacking the calluses and roughness of years of military training and working with her hands,
she could feel the texture and detail of Liara’s skin better than she ever had before.

Liara saw the bewildered adoration and amazement written plainly on Shepard’s face, but could not
fathom the cause. She smiled and queried softly, “Rachaél? What are you thinking?”

Shepard chuckled quietly and held her hand out to Liara, explaining the origin of her surprise. “I can
actually feel your skin, Li. The pliability and softness … the level of sensation in my hands … Your
skin is amazing!”

It was a swift reminder to Liara that the woman before her lacked her previous defining scars, every
single one erased by a pristine clone body that had never known military action or hardship.
“Goddess … as is yours! I hadn’t really taken the time to think about it, but your new body is …
perfect … No. That’s not the right word, because such a statement presumes what you were before
was imperfect, and that’s not true. It’s simply … pristine, as if you’ve never …” She paused and
giggled. “I was going to say never, and it’s true. This body has never fought a battle, ever. All the
action you saw during the hunt for Saran … your battles with Blue Suns mercenaries and Collectors
… they all took a toll on your physical shell, but not this one.”

Liara sat up and her hands slid across smooth skin, before leaning forward and dripping kisses across Rachaél chest. “And it is certainly something I can get used to.” She smirked at the expression that tripped across Shepard’s face as her tongue tweaked an erect nipple on the way by. Liara gently cupped the accosted breast with a warm palm in an attempt to calm its combined excitement and irritation, as she was determined to move slowly, to not rush the main event. Liara had every intention of enjoying their private time … and to rediscover one another, extremely slowly and in positively glorious detail.

Shepard had other ideas, the heat of her passion making her nipples stand painfully erect, even with Liara’s attempts at dousing their fire. Her hand returned quickly to the back of the asari’s neck, whose body instantly betrayed her, the folds opening eagerly to receive the commander’s touch. Liara gasped and instantly reached out with her mind. [Rachaél! Please! I want to move slowly … take our time.] She felt the initial hurt slip through the meld before Shepard cut it off, the barriers within the human’s mind rapidly shutting down the flow of emotions, leaving their connection barren and hollow.

Rachaél’s voice was plaintive, reflecting the rejection she was feeling as she spoke aloud, “I’ve lacked any sort of physical contact for months … more than a year …” Tears began to trickle down her cheeks as she choked out, “I … I didn’t realize how much I missed it until I got it all back … Got you back.” Her throat closed and she stopped talking; she turned away, moving to sit on the edge of the bed and dropping her head into her hands as she swallowed a sob. “I’m sorry, Li … Apparently, I’ve forgotten how … how to control myself around the physical manifestations of real people.”

By the Goddess! Liara felt her heart wrench, suddenly realizing the bereft feeling that ripped through her soul at Shepard’s sudden departure was only a fleeting moment compared to the nearly fourteen months Shepard had been trapped within the computer core and her own mind. Liara sat up quickly and wrapped herself around the woman struggling to get a grip on her emotions. “No! Don’t you dare apologize for loving and missing me, Siame! I’m the one who should be sorry … I didn’t think about how you must feel, being in a physical body again, or how you would interpret my words. I certainly did not mean for you to stop … I just want to make sure you know that it is more than alright if you need or want to take your time … to enjoy every single sensation as it comes. I certainly do.”

Liara reached around and gently cupped Shepard’s chin to turn her head, kissing the tears off her cheeks. [Come back to me, Rachaél … I’ve missed you as well. We have plenty of time to go slow … but perhaps later. Right now, it seems to me, you need me and I … I want you, with every fiber of my being.]

“Are you sure, Li?” Shepard’s eyes still had a glassy look; her expression was anguished and her voice low. “I don’t want to pressure you to …”

She was silenced by Liara’s lips on hers, pressing her backwards onto the bed. [Of course I’m sure, Siame. I love you … beyond reason. We may have been separated by time and circumstance, but my love for you has never dimmed … not in the slightest. I am simply concerned for your wellbeing. Your body is not yet fully awakened and I am afraid to do too much too fast.]

Shepard took in a shaky breath and groaned as Liara’s hands traveled down her abs. She grinned and her mood improved greatly as she remembered Dr Chakwas’ parting comments to her as she left the Med Bay. [Karin assures me this body was enhanced and exercised as they grew it … so my musculature is well developed and the enhanced healing rate was included as part of the standard
upgrades … Strenuous exercise should not be a problem.)

Liara felt Rachaël’s shift to honestly playful banter, trusting the emotion more so than the words, and she pulled back from the kiss to stare into Shepard’s face. She saw a familiar lopsided smirk and couldn’t help herself; her hand dropped quickly, wiping the smug expression from Shepard’s face as nimble blue fingers stroked across her sex. \textit{Then the scientist in me is eager to test that hypothesis, Commander.}

Shepard growled mischievously and brought a knee up in order to firmly plant a thigh in Liara’s crotch before pushing off from the bed and reversing their positions. Seeing the surprise on her lover’s face, she grinned. \textit{And just how do you propose to do that, Dr T’Soni?} Before the asari could answer, Shepard slid down to quickly assume a new position; her left hand palmed and began to massage Liara’s right breast while her right arm snaked around her lover’s hips, to slip the fingers of her right hand into the tender folds of her lower back.

Liara cried out when Shepard’s warm mouth surrounded an engorged blue nub, a pink tongue darting in and stealing a first exotic taste in what seemed like forever. Rachaël’s loving devotion and admiration of Liara’s magnificently toned physique poured through the meld, unchecked and heightening the asari’s desire while bulldozing any trepidation about the need to go slow. It wasn’t long before Liara’s back arched and Shepard felt an inadvertent, not-so-gentle tug as blue hands fistled clumps of her hair, followed immediately by a breathless apology … but the grip did not loosen. \textit{Oh, Goddess! I’m sorry … Please … Rachaël! …}

The emotions accompanying each of Liara’s words grew in intensity as Shepard’s fingertips, lips and tongue continued to torment and tease until an almost violent buck of Liara’s hips preceded a surge of hot ecstasy exploding from within to wash over Shepard’s face in welcome relief from the mounting pressure. \textit{(Rachaël!)}

Liara’s mental shout was accompanied by an overwhelming rush of emotion; her adoration, delight and rapture pulled Shepard along like a rip tide, drowning her sense of self as she and Liara united in sweet release. Shepard felt all her muscles contract as a bolt of desire from her lover went directly through her core; she barely had time to grunt in her surprise at its intensity before she also soaked the sheets where they lay.

Their hearts beating as one, Liara released her grip on Rachaël’s hair and gently caressed her head. Shepard wiped her face with the corner of the sheet and shimmied up to lie next to her bondmate, releasing a contented sigh as she snuggled in. Liara smiled tiredly as she slowly withdrew from the meld, their emotions settling even as their hearts continued to beat rapidly in their chests from the exertion. Shepard drew a deep breath and whispered softly, “Thank you, Blue … That was magnificent.” She then grinned and couldn’t help but add, “So, uhm … Was that a satisfactory test?”

Liara laughed joyfully; a carefree, celebratory sound that was music to Shepard’s ears. Rachaël pushed herself back up on her forearm, hovering once more above the asari and looking down into now contented eyes of blue. “I’ll take that as a yes, Dr T’Soni.”

Liara surged upward and wrapped her arms around the smiling human, spinning them so Shepard was on her back and Liara was stretched out fully atop her \textit{siame}. Elbows resting on the bed, she allowed her fingers to play with Rachaël’s hair, tucking errant strands behind her adorable protruding ears. “That is most definitely a yes, Rachaël … an \textit{unequivocal} yes.” Much to Shepard’s surprise, the asari’s voice suddenly took on a beguiling lilt. “However, as a scientist, I’ve also learned that no hypothesis can become theory until it has been successfully tested a sufficient number of times, to provide irrefutable evidence of verifiable, and repeatable, results.”

The commander’s eyes widened at the suggestion within Liara’s statement. “Could you please
define ‘a sufficient number of times’ for me, Dr T’ Soni?”

“I’m not sure of that exact number, Siame.” Liara’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “It depends largely upon the continuity of the data as we collect it. We’ll simply have to continue the experiment and see.” With that, Liara leaned forward and claimed Shepard’s lips with her own, her eyes once again turning as dark as a starless night.
Rediscovery of Physical Love

You are every beautiful thing that has ever happened to me wrapped in a person. You may think you are ordinary, but to me you are as magical as the ocean — Nikita Gill

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**Inamorata** – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

**Ionúin álainn** – beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

**Mo cheann geallta** – My promised one (Gaelic)

**OSD** – Optical Storage Device, analogous to compact data disks of the early twenty-first century

**Siame** – “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

♦ NORMANDY · PORT SIDE CARGO COMPARTMENT ♦

Rachaél Shepard woke slowly, relishing the ‘between’ that was sleep and wakefulness. She had never slept while trapped in the Normandy’s server … never dreamed … never needed rest. It was an odd feeling to once again require sleep after such a long time … not unwelcome, just … odd. She concentrated on her senses without opening her eyes. There were sounds … mechanical—those of the ship within whose computer she had been imprisoned—pumps, fans, engines. There were other sounds—organic in origin—within and beside her. Within, the sound of blood being pumped through her body. She could actually hear the pulses of liquid in the arteries within her neck.

Without, a person’s breathing, slow, measured, led her to think of touch … warmth, everywhere along her left side, a nude form, obviously feminine, soft in places, muscular in others. An arm, lying possessively across her torso; a hand, fingers splayed, resting on her right breast as if holding it in place. A muscular leg, thigh across both of hers, lower leg and foot resting between the calves of her own legs.

The full-body contact with this person imparted comfort, a deep feeling of peace, as if her soul was being lovingly caressed; she remembered … having nearly gone mad in the server, from a simple lack of feeling … anything. It was only because of EDI … Edie Coré, as she was now named, that Rachaél had been able to retain her sanity in a place where her mind was denied all the physical manifestations of the human body over which it had previously been in control.

Rachaél kept her eyes closed as she slowly turned her head to the left, allowing her lips to softly touch the pebbled skin of the beautiful blue being snuggled up to her side. The sound of her hair moving on the crisply ironed pillowcase sounded loud to her ears. She placed a gentle kiss on Liara’s forehead as she used her newly regained sense of smell to rejoice in the familiar scents of Thessian Rose and Eezo, absent from her life for much too long. Another kiss, slightly longer, elicited a low hum of contentment from her Ionúin álainn; this caused Rachaél to draw back for a moment, as she hadn’t wanted Liara to awaken just yet.

A whispered, “Rachaél,” was followed by a hand gently caressing the breast beneath it and a head moving slightly to plant a return kiss between her collar bones in the hollow at her throat. “How did you sleep, Siame?”

Rachaél whispered, “As if I was in heaven, Li. I actually cannot describe how incredibly fortunate I feel to be able to be with you once again. I don’t believe I ever appreciated just how … intense … the physical side of our lovemaking could be.”

Liara purred in contentment for a moment before replying, “Lying here with you … skin on skin, is a
dream come true. I will be forever grateful to the Goddess for the gift of Miranda Lawson’s existence; she has given me … has given us, the ultimate gift.” Liara ran her hand and fingers softly over Rachaël’s body, as if committing every centimeter of her skin to memory, before placing fingers alongside her cheek to pull her head gently towards her so her lips could savor the sweet softness of the human’s mouth.

“You keep kissing me that way, Dr T’Soni, and I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

Liara giggled softly. “By the Goddess … I thought I had lost you, my love. I have … we have … a lot to rediscover about each other.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, Mo cheann geallta,” Rachaël growled in response.

♦ QEC COMPARTMENT ♦

“What may I do for you this morning, Bill?”

Captain Bill Cody studied the image of his former executive officer, now captain of his former command, the SSV Hong Kong II. “XO Adams is making preparations for leaving our host and getting under way. Before we do that, is there anything else Specialist Lawson needs to do concerning the clones in storage here?”

“Miranda reported she has done everything she can to ensure the viability of the clones for the long term. She has inserted all the implants Shepard’s new body will require, including her bioamp.” Xiùlán glanced at a datapad she was holding. “If she thinks of anything else needing to be done, she assures me it can safely wait until after our return to the Citadel.”

Bill smiled as he responded, “Very well, Captain. There’s one other matter we need to consider before we depart … the status of the Shadow Broker. I believe the Alliance … hell, I’ll be honest here … I believe I have need of the Broker’s services.”

The Hong Kong’s captain grinned. “I don’t expect the person we know as the Shadow Broker will be returning to her former office inside Iringù-Eßizkur. Real shame, actually … all that equipment?” Xiùlán looked down at the deck for several moments; returning her gaze to Cody’s image on her own ship, she added solemnly, “I may know a person that might be a good candidate to fill the roll, but there’d need to be someone with … her.”

This got Cody’s full attention. “I take it this … person … works in an Alliance uniform?”

“Afraid so, Bill. As I said, she will not consider doing it if she has to ride in Iringù-Eßizkur by herself … and ordering her to take the job would do none of us any favors. It has to be something for which she’d be willing to volunteer.” Xiùlán glanced over her shoulder for a moment; returning her attention to Cody’s image, she said, “Speak with Dr T’Soni, Bill. We have time before we return to iron out the details.”

“Are you going to give me a hint as to who you have in mind?”

“Not until all the specifics have been discussed. Speak with Liara … I’m sure she’ll know of someone in her organization that would be willing to join the person I have in mind. If we can convince them to volunteer for the task, perhaps on a short-term basis, it would benefit all of us immensely.”

Cody chuckled. “You do realize you are being inscrutable.”
Yuán grinned right back. “That’s a stereotype perpetrated by the entertainment industry, Bill. Next thing I know, you’ll be calling me the Dragon Lady, and not just because of the tattoo on my back!”

Cody had the good grace to act surprised. “You have a tattoo?”

“Don’t act like you’ve never seen it,” came the smirking rejoinder. “I was in the hospital with a serious injury to my back from a bullet meant for Miranda.”

“Okay, mystery woman. I’ll speak with Liara and talk to you later.” Cody disconnected the link, causing Xiùlán’s image to swirl around and disappear. Activating the comm link in his ear, he called his XO. “Commander, let’s get the Normandy out of this space-born dry dock and back into its element.”

Adams replied, “As you wish, Captain.”

Cody smiled as he left the QEC. Xiùlán wouldn’t tell him the name of the person she had in mind to take over for the Shadow Broker, but he had a feeling he already knew the identity of the … woman; if his gut was right, she was currently working in the CIC.

♦  CONFERENCE ROOM  ♦

Having been invited by Captain Cody to come up for a private meeting, Liara T’Soni, followed by Rachaél Shepard, walked into the Conference Room, where they each took a seat across the table from the captain of the Normandy. He picked up a pitcher from the table and poured water into a pair of glasses; setting one in front of each of his guests, he said, “First of all, this is all off the record. Nothing either of you say will be recorded. I want you both to be completely honest with me regarding your intentions once we dock at the Citadel.”

Rachaél fixed Cody with a steely gaze, her eyes the murky green of a storm-tossed ocean. “Why would you think we would be anything but honest, Captain? At this moment, neither of us has plans to do anything more for the Systems Alliance. I gave them my life … twice! The first time I died, the Alliance didn’t even have the decency to search for my body … just declared me KIA. I really don’t feel I owe the Alliance another damned minute of my time. I have nothing to prove, to the Systems Alliance, or anyone else.”

Liara grasped Shepard’s hand under the table as she added, “We plan to disembark from the Normandy when we reach the Citadel, move our possessions and ourselves to Shepard’s apartment in Tiberius Towers.”

Cody asked, “Have you spoken with Admiral Hackett?”

Shepard’s mouth tightened into a hard line. “I have, last night. He made me an offer he thinks I cannot refuse.”

“Which is?”

“Promotion to captain … command of any ship in the fleet … my choice.” Rachaél looked at her Inamorata with an expression of sadness.

“Sounds like a sweet deal, Shepard,” Cody said. “So, you going to take him up on it?”

Shaking her head, she replied, “We’re going to meet at the Citadel when we get back. As I just said, I’m done … with the Alliance … maybe even with the Spectres. I have no interest in doing anything more, for anyone, except this beautiful asari sitting beside me.”
“That would be a terrible loss for the Alliance, Shepard, not to mention the Spectre Corp. I hope you will change your mind before we reach the Citadel … hell, if it’ll help, I’ll even step aside so you can captain the Normandy.”

Shepard smiled. “I was only captain of this ship as a means to an end … to eliminate the Collectors … and to terminate the Reapers; your offer to step aside says more about you as a person than you realize, Bill. I wouldn’t … couldn’t … do that … take your ship after you just moved into the loft? It wouldn’t be right.

Cody smiled. “Thank you. I didn’t expect you would take me up on the offer … you’re not that type of person.” Taking a sip of water from the glass in front of him, he looked at Liara and said, “So, my guess would be you are no longer interested in being the Shadow Broker.”

Liara looked at Rachael for a moment before turning back to face Cody. “I took over the organization after Shepard and I killed the previous Broker – a yahg. As we had also killed the few operatives aware of the Broker’s true identity, it didn’t arouse anyone’s suspicions … no one suspected a transition. I used the position to help Shepard find a way to combat the Reapers.”

Cody stroked his chin as he leaned back in his chair. “Dr T’Soni, I’m on a mission to eradicate the Blue Suns from the galaxy. Having the services of the galaxy’s premier information broker would be a great benefit to me, and all your equipment is still operational inside Iringû-Eßizkur.”

“I knew there had to be a good reason for Zaeed Massani’s presence on board,” Rachael said with a smirk. “Once you get him close enough, he’s going to take care of Vido Santiago and Solem Dal’Serah for you, isn’t he?”

“That’s the plan. The Suns have gone completely over the line, Shepard. They tried to kill Specialist Lawson in the shuttle between the Hong Kong and the hospital, then in the damned hospital on the Citadel … seriously injuring Captain Yuán in that attempt. Tried to kill me as well. I had to kick C-Sec out, take over security on those floors. Couldn’t trust that a turian in a C-Sec uniform wasn’t actually a Blue Suns soldier.”

Shepard grimaced. “I’ll bet Commander Bailey wasn’t too pleased about that.”

“I wasn’t on his list of popular Alliance officers, no.” With a grimace, he added, “After Lawson’s discharge from the hospital, the Suns made another attempt on her life near the Alliance docks; Yuán managed to prevent it, and she captured the little bastard leading the effort—a CAT6 washout from an Alliance special ops school on the moon—he’s sitting in the Alliance detention center on the Citadel.”

Shepard shook her head. “You do realize I’m on the Sun’s shit-list as well, don’t you … as is Liara? After the SR-I was destroyed, they recovered my body from Alchera; were going to sell it to the previous Shadow Broker, so he could sell it to the Collectors; Liara helped Cerberus liberate it … me … from the Blue Suns before the transfer could be completed.” Shepard chuckled at the thought that came to mind. “I’ve cost them hundreds of thousands of creds, directly or indirectly, since being named the first human Spectre.”

Cody nodded his head, saying, “I always suspected there was more to their agenda than should be attributable to a merc gang. Some of their most recent actions are finally beginning to make sense to me.” Taking a sip of water, he added, “They’ve even become interested in eliminating Zaeed Massani.”

Looking straight at Liara, Cody asked, “Dr T’Soni, is there anyone in your organization … an agent, or a clandestine operative, that we could ask to take a position inside Iringû-Eßizkur? Captain Yuán
has told me she can provide the name of a person that might … just might … be amenable to replacing the current Shadow Broker on a temporary basis, but only if the person in question is not alone inside that Repository.”

_Traynor, Liara thought to herself. Must be Traynor … No one else I know has had any training in my methods._ “I’m sure there must be someone …” Liara did not smile as she replied, “… but I’ll have to go through my records to locate a few candidates with an aptitude for that sort of work.”

Cody replied with a smile of gratitude. “That would be appreciated, Dr T’Soni.”

♦ SSV HONG KONG II · CIC ♦

Using an isolated server, Specialist Lawson had carefully gone through almost all of the files Captain Yuán and her team had retrieved from Minuteman Station, abandoned by Cerberus since before the end of the Reaper war. After running the design files—which were merely data files with no executable instructions—through several programs designed by the best computer programming scientists in the Alliance, she transferred each design file to a new, blank OSD in order to isolate it from the Hong Kong’s servers.

She had just started an analysis of the file containing design specs for a new class of fighter/interceptor when it happened; the terminal she was standing in front of began smoking, accompanied by the furious flashing of the haptic interface. Miranda only had time to holler, “Everyone down!” as she herself dropped to the deck. The terminal erupted into a fireball as it exploded with a dull _THUMP_, scattering razor-sharp poly-crystalline shards in all directions. The small fire in the remaining circuitry was quickly extinguished by jets of inert gas from nozzles in the overhead; this was accompanied by the loud, repeated _WHOOP-WHOOP_ of the Hong Kong’s onboard fire alarm and the automated closing and sealing of whatever compartment hatches were open on board the ship.

Lawson and Lieutenant Cross got back to their feet, along with the several other technicians that had been standing at their nearby duty stations. Cross moved to an emergency control panel, where he silenced the fire alarm and restored power to the ventilator fans, which had automatically shut down to prevent the fire spreading to the rest of the ship through the ductwork.

The hatch from Deck Two opened to reveal a damage control detail; this was led by Corporal Vic and followed by Captain Yuán, who placed her hands on her hips as she glanced around her CIC before saying, “Lieutenant Cross … SITREP, please!”

Before Cross could reply, Miranda stepped up beside him and said, “It was the isolated terminal I was using to parse the files we brought back from Minuteman Station, Ma’am. There must have been something malicious in the advanced fighter/interceptor design files … I had barely begun my analysis of the file when the terminal began smoking.”

“Anyone hurt?”

Cross, not having had time to check on everyone in the CIC before Yuán arrived, simply replied, “Still assessing, Ma’am.”

Yuán was not happy at his reply, but realized he needed a bit more time; she frowned for a moment before saying, “I need a report as soon as you can, Lieutenant. Ms Lawson, were there any other files on that terminal?”

“No, Ma’am. I was uploading each file individually for inspection … no more than one file on the
terminal at a time. As soon as I’d scrubbed through the data, I removed the file from the terminal … downloaded it to a new OSD.”

“The terminal you were using … it wasn’t connected to the ship’s servers in any way, was it?”

“No, Ma’am. Completely isolated … even running on its own power supply. I never trusted that Cerberus hadn’t developed a way for a computer to spread something nasty through a simple power coupling.”

The corners of Xiùlán’s mouth turned up slightly. “I expect if anyone would know what Cerberus was capable of, it would be you, Ms Lawson. Thank you.”

While Yuán was speaking with Miranda, Cross had checked with everyone else in the CIC at the time of the explosion; stepping up beside Lawson, he reported, “No physical injuries to any of the crew, Ma’am, and no damage to ship’s systems. The DC crew will gather up the scattered remnants of the terminal for closer inspection. Written report will be on your desk within forty minutes, Ma’am.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Carry on.” With a quick glance at Miranda, Xiùlán turned and left the CIC for Deck Two.

Lieutenant Cross looked at Miranda and said, “Nice work, Specialist. My only question now is, where are you going to find another stand-alone terminal to use for the rest of those files?”

Miranda smiled serenely as she replied, “That was the only one on this ship, Lieutenant. Do you think we can borrow one from the Normandy before it jumps for the Citadel?”

“Won’t hurt to ask … I’ll send a message to XO Adams. I believe Normandy has left Harbinger and the crew is making ready to get underway.”

ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA

The MSV Crystal Lance, on its regularly scheduled, twice monthly trip through the systems with human colonies, slowed rapidly to sub-light velocity beside the Mass Relay; after port calls in the Widow and Sol Systems, the freight-hauling passenger ship had changed course and was now heading for the planet Elysium. Once on the ground, it offloaded cargo consisting mainly of construction supplies, along with a few people arriving to assist in the colony’s reconstruction efforts.

Of the people leaving the ship at this stopover, one in particular stood out, as everyone else gave her a wide berth; the woman, head mostly shaved to show the tattoos on the sides and back, had short hair on top that ended in a jaunty ponytail. Black eye-liner and bright red lipstick served to harden her features, no doubt assisted by the distinct scars in the skin about her neck.

She was wearing a studded, long-sleeve leather vest, unfastened in front, leaving most of her bare torso exposed except for a pair of cloth strips that crisscrossed from her neck down, placed to partially cover small breasts before crossing to her back, then down below her navel to wrap around her well-muscled thighs. It seemed every centimeter of exposed skin was covered in tattoos. A wide leather belt encircled her hips, holding up a pair of camo-patterned pants with deep cutouts on the outer portions of the thighs, allowing a view of the ink on her legs. Electronically-enhanced braces encircled each leg just above the knee; these were connected to similar braces at the tops of the heavy, knee-high boots protecting her lower legs and feet.

After checking through customs—where she verbally abused one fellow for seeming to stare at her
chest—she grabbed her pack and headed for the kiosk offering rental transportation. Swiping her omnitool over the payment reader activated the closest X3M aircar; tossing her pack in the back, she climbed in, entered her destination and sat back as the canopy lowered. The rental spun about on its axis and headed off for the outskirts of the colony’s capitol city.

♦ NORMANDY · PORT SIDE CARGO COMPARTMENT ♦

As the Normandy, accompanied by Harbinger and Iringù-Ebízkur, accelerated towards the Pax relay, Shepard was again sitting at the workbench turned makeshift desk, where she was deeply immersed in browsing the Extranet. Liara walked up behind her to place her hands on Rachaél’s shoulders. “Anything interesting?”

“Just browsing the newsfeeds, Blue … Trying to get a feel for the state of the galaxy.” Tilting her head back, she looked up at Liara, who promptly leaned down to place an upside-down kiss on receptive lips. As Liara returned to an upright position, Rachaél said, “So, are there any of your agents that would be a good companion for Samantha Traynor as the new broker?” Liara’s surprised look brought a chuckle from Rachaél.

“What leads you to believe Traynor is the person Captain Yuán was referring to when she spoke to Bill Cody earlier?” Liara's hands traveled Shepard's shoulders and pectoral muscles, massaging gently as they spoke; the Asari still found it difficult to believe the woman existed beneath her hands and couldn't keep from touching her for the constant reassurance that Rachaél was truly back in physical form.

“You seem to forget … I’ve been on this ship since just after firing the Crucible. Traynor was your assistant while you recovered from her punching you in the face.” Shepard chuckled again. “I’m still having a difficult time wrapping my head around the amount of special-ops training she received. Even in the ship’s computer, I had no access to the thirty-month gap in her records.”

Liara smiled down at the human’s face. “I guess that means you’re unaware of Yuán Xiùlán’s training as well … or that they trained together, Rachaél. I did some digging after Sammy spoke with Xiùlán while we were on our return trip to civilization.”

“Those records were sealed to everyone below flag officer level … How did you manage to uncover any of that?”

The smirk Rachaél received as Liara came around to sit in her lap spoke volumes about the capabilities of the asari Shadow Broker. “Xiùlán isn’t just Sammy’s lover, Rachaël … She was also Sam’s martial arts instructor in the program. They were not even half-way through the classes before the commandant began getting reports that none of Yuán’s or Traynor’s classmates would go toe-to-toe with them. Not even the instructors would step on the mat with them … Even in the ship’s computer, I had no access to the thirty-month gap in her records.”

Liara smiled at Rachaél’s look of skepticism as she continued. “It seems they enter into a trance-like state when fighting … one report I read concerning Xiùlán told of how she took on an asari commando in a training exercise. Aglyna T’Sega’s nearly 285-years’ experience were no match for Xiùlán, who quickly and convincingly took the huntress to the ground … She would have permanently finished T’Sega with an omni-tool ‘straight blade’ up into her vitals if Mallene Calis hadn’t hit Yuán with a short-lived stasis field”

“You’re stretching the limits of what I can believe, T’Soni. What about T’Sega’s biotics?”

“Blocked in order to even the match. Neither Yuán nor Traynor possess any biotic ability; being
limited in that aspect would have excluded them from being sent out against biotically trained individuals. Might be one of several reasons their program was terminated and their records sealed.”

“Okay, Samantha Traynor would seem to be the logical candidate to take your place inside Iringū-Ébizkur. She would still need to have a companion … someone she can completely trust with her life. Anyone come to mind?”

“I’ve sent a message to one of my field agents. I should hear back before we reach the Citadel.” Liara pushed herself up from Shepard’s lap and moved to sit in an adjacent chair. “As soon as I receive an answer, I’ll let you know.”

As Liara moved away, Shepard cocked an eyebrow at the soon-to-be-retired Shadow Broker. “Seriously? You going all Broker on me and not telling me who you have in mind for the job?”

Liara answered with a knowing smirk. “Commander Shepard. You, of all people, must realize that the Shadow Broker simply does not give away information; it comes at a cost.” Her blue eyes sparkled impishly as she queried, “What, exactly, is the information worth to you?” She let out a squeak of surprise, but was not nearly fast enough to escape when Shepard vaulted from her chair in pursuit.

♦ ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

“Hey Sanders! Kahlee Sanders!” Jack stood outside the rental aircar she’d arrived in from Illyria. She had a hunch Kahlee had a gun trained on her from somewhere within the partially ruined house, seven meters from where she stood, arms away from her body, palms facing front. “Kahlee, it’s Jack! I know you’re in there … Alenko called me, told me you’re holed up here. You know me, Kahlee. I just want to talk … no weapons … no bullshit.”

Jack waited, counting in her head. As she reached twenty-five, the main door slowly slid aside to reveal first a heavy pistol, along with the hand holding it; the owner of the hand slowly stepped past the threshold to stand half-a-meter from the door. Jack was sure it was Kahlee – her pale blue eyes and shoulder-length blond hair were her most telling features.

“What do you want, Jack?” Kahlee’s gun never wavered, and the determined look in her eyes and the set of her jaw was all Jack needed to convince herself to stand perfectly still.

“Like I said, I’m just here to talk to you.” Jack nodded towards the house as she added, “I brought a bottle … least you can do is invite me in for a drink, for old times’ sake.”

Sanders glanced quickly around to either side; returning her full attention to Jack, she apparently came to a decision; allowing her gun hand to slowly fall to her side, she turned and reentered her house as she said with a sigh, “Come on in.”

Reaching back into the rental aircar, Jack grabbed her pack, then released the vehicle so she wouldn’t have to pay for wait time. Thinking, If Sanders decides to kick me out, might be a long walk back to the Illyria spaceport. She carefully entered the house and turned towards what appeared to be the dining room. As she set her pack in a side chair, she reached into an external pocket to pull out a bottle of whiskey. “I’ve got the booze right here, Sanders.” She spoke a bit louder in order to be heard over the concealed speakers, blaring out a heavy bass measure of club music.

Kahlee had placed a couple of tumblers on the small table, and sat as Jack joined her. “Why in hell did Alenko contact you? Did he tell you to drop in on me, see if you could persuade the recluse to
go up to Grissom?” She opened the bottle Jack had brought and poured each of them a generous measure.

“Hell, he’s concerned about you, Sanders … and I can see why. I know this house belonged to your dad before the war.” Kahlee’s look of shock at her statement was met with Jack’s usual disdain for the niceties of decorum. “Grissom’s been fuckin’ dead for two years now … I don’t think anyone gives a good rat’s ass that you’re his daughter … certainly can’t hold it over his head now, can they?” Jack took a sample from her glass and grimaced as the amber liquid burned its way down her throat.

“Anyway, he’s concerned, as is Admiral Hackett. To answer your question, Alenko managed to get in touch with me … asked me to join him on the station and return to my old job as an instructor.” With a chuckle, she added, “It’s not like I have anything better to do with my time. War’s over, bastard Illusive Man’s dead, remnants of Cerberus scattered all over the damned galaxy. I’m a specialist, Sanders … in a very narrow field of interest … on Earth, anyway.”

Kahlee took a swallow from her own glass, enjoying the smoothness of the whiskey in her mouth, even as it burned its way down to her stomach; carefully setting the glass on the table, she responded, “I appreciate you coming all this way out here, Jack. It’s really nice to see you again, and I’m glad …” Sanders paused, took a sip from her glass and grimaced as she swallowed the fiery liquid. “…I’m really happy you survived the war. A lot of good people …” she fought past the emotion constricting her throat, “… a lot didn’t.”

Jack nodded, replying in a soft voice, “Like Commander Shepard … and Admiral Anderson.”

Sanders winced as Jack spoke Anderson’s name. “I always felt if anyone had a chance of surviving the damned war, it was David.” She glared at Jack, the hurt in her soul fully on display as moisture gathered in her pale blue eyes. “To make it all the way to the end, only to be cut down minutes before our victory …” The unshed tears overflowed when she blinked, running down her cheeks in a pair of rivulets, to be angrily swiped at by the backs of her hands.

“I’m sorry, Kahlee … I’m sorry that you lost your father … that you lost Anderson.” Jack tossed back the rest of her drink, set the glass down and reached across the table, hand open, palm up. “It’s tough, ya know? Losing people you love? I lost some of my kids down on Earth. The one that hurts me the most? Rodriguez. She constantly disregarded her barriers; in the end, it got her killed. I will always consider her death a personal failure.” Jack had never been one to cry over anything … growing up as a Cerberus lab experiment had stripped away virtually all of her empathy for others, but thinking of how Rodriguez had died from attacks by an overwhelming number of husks brought tears to her eyes.

Sanders, hearing the catch in Jack’s voice as she spoke about her students, met the sadness in her eyes with that of her own as she reached for and took the biotic’s hand. “I’m sorry for your loss, Jack. It seems none of us made it through unscathed.” It was the first time Kahlee had physically touched another since she’d arrived on Elysium; Jack’s hand felt cool, but warmed rapidly as Kahlee held on. “So, now what?”

Jack squeezed the hand she was holding and smirked. “Now, you need to pack your gear and come with me to Grissom. Alenko could use your help … hell, even I could use your help. It’s time to get that school running again … it’ll give both of us something constructive to do.” The biotic’s smirk disappeared, to be replaced by a serious expression. “Don’t know about you, but I’m fucking tired of destruction. I want to do something positive again.”
Chief Warrant Officer Miranda Lawson grinned as she set the stand-alone computer terminal—delivered from the Normandy before the ship left for the relay on its return trip to the Citadel—on the small weapons repair bench near the main ramp. She wasn’t going to take any chances with rogue program coding destroying another terminal in the Hong Kong’s sensitive CIC; down here in the hanger bay, any explosion caused by a Cerberus engineered virus would be easily contained by a small dampening field surrounding the device.

As the design specs for a new, highly advanced fighter/interceptor had been copied onto an OSD from a Cerberus databank on Minuteman Station, Miranda felt the destructive code was somehow ‘outside’ the data files for the new design. Having been witness to more than a few of the Illusive Man’s paranoid beliefs, she suspected the data itself was free of any corruption. Question was, how to delete the destructive code without affecting the integrity of the design data.

Miranda had asked Specialist Traynor how best to prevent a repeat of the explosive melt-down she’d seen in the CIC; Traynor had included a special utility plug-in designed to detect and safely eliminate the sort of destructive program suspected to be the cause of the earlier incident. Miranda initiated the search function prior to inserting the OSD into the reader; the utility quickly accessed the entire disk, flashing its results on the view screen. Damned Illusive Man! Son of a bitch must have thought that a sub-routine outside the data files wouldn’t be discovered and purged prior to retrieval of the data, she thought. Turns out he was correct … just glad it didn’t cost us more than a piece of hardware.

With the damaging bit of software isolated, Miranda was able to scrub through the data files for the design specs of the advanced fighter/interceptor. Once she was done, she copied just that data to a clean OSD, then purged the memory in the computer and wiped the original OSD before shredding and recycling it. Inserting the newly created OSD, she ran Traynor’s utility to double check its status; finding only the data files, she ejected the OSD and powered down the terminal. ‘Now, just need to see Captain Yuán to find out if she’s planning a return trip to Minuteman …’

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE MILITARY DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

The Normandy had returned to dock Charlie-seven, berth Zero-three. As ground handlers performed the myriad tasks required to connect the ship to shore-based utilities, Captain Cody answered the entry request to his office in the loft on Deck One.

With a smile, he offered his hand to Zaeed Massani. “Come on in, Zaeed … have a seat on the couch. I’ll be right with you.” Cody moved to his desk, where he selected and grabbed a datapad from the several sitting there; moving around the model ship display case, he descended the two steps into his ‘living’ area to join his guest.

Sitting in the upholstered chair, he looked at the datapad as he spoke with the old merc. “Zaeed, I’m not sure how long the Normandy will remain docked here at the Citadel. Having said that, I am sure you’ll want to leave the ship so you can return to your hunt for Solem Dal’Serah.”

Zaeed fixed Cody with a glare as he replied, “Goddamn right, Cap’n. That slippery bastard ’as been breathin’ too damn long. I need ter end ’im.”

Before Cody could comment, the entry request chime sounded at the hatch. Activating his omnitool, Cody remotely unlocked the door and invited his visitor to enter once the segments had retracted; standing from the chair, he waited as Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton walked in and down the stairs. “Captain … Massani.”

Cody smiled as he shook her hand. “Master Guns, I have an assignment ashore for you, and it may involve staying behind if the Normandy has to unexpectedly depart. You’ll be accompanying
Massani on *our* quest to rid the galaxy of Solem Dal’Serah."

Patton’s face reflected a mixture of surprise and anticipation. “Just what will this assignment entail, Captain?”

Massani’s surprise was also evident as he began to protest. “Cap’n Cody, I would really rather …”

Cody interrupted with, “… She’s gonna cover your six, Zaeed. She already saved your ass once, and I need your knowledge of how Vido Santiago operates to ensure we can totally eliminate the driving force behind the Blue Suns.”

Patton said, “Does that mean I’ll be staying ashore with Massani, Captain? We’d need use of a safe-house of some sort, preferably within an Alliance secured area. It would be nice if we didn’t need to share sleeping quarters, too.” Looking at Massani, she snarked, “Him sleeping in the starboard freight compartment on Deck Four? He can be heard in the crew’s mess area, Sir.”

Massani chuckled. “She’s right, there. I snore louder than an Elcor wiv a cold ever since my nose got broke. I kin rattle the dishes once I get goin’ good.”

Cody grinned at Patton. “I’m sure you must have some kind of ear protection for practice shooting. Might be useful in this situation.” Activating his omnitool, he sent the location of the two Alliance safe houses on the Citadel to Patton’s and Massani’s omnitools, along with a credit authorization. “That should get both of you by for a time. Patton, your work here on the *Normandy* has been exemplary, so I want you to know your absence will be felt. I’m hoping you can help Zaeed quickly accomplish his task.”

Massani stood, as did Patton. “So, guess we need ter get our gear together, eh darlin?’”

Patton replied, “Yes, and I’m not your fuckin’ darling, Zaeed.”

Cody stood as well, saying, “Good luck, to both of you. Patton, I’ll expect updates on your progress. Try to not go too long without reporting in … it’d be nice to know you’re both still alive.”

“Aye, Captain.”
Powers of Persuasion

You are damaged and broken and unhinged. But so are shooting stars and comets – Nikita Gill

Ionúin álainn – beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Siame – “one who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE MILITARY DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

As soon as Joker had the *Normandy* securely docked, several people left the ship and went their separate ways – Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton, wearing her full armor set with her Helix model-10 rifle and M-11 heavy pistol docked on their respective hardpoints, was accompanied by Zaeed Massani, also armed and armored. After exiting the ship through the hanger bay, Zaeed placed a hand in the center of Patton’s back, both to gently guide her on the route the old Merc wished to travel, and as a tactile reminder that he was walking along beside her.

Patton had glanced at him when she felt his touch, but said nothing; as much as she protested in front of others when Massani said something crude or called her ‘darlin’ or ‘sweetheart’, and in spite of their age difference, she had developed a genuine affection for the gruff old man. Sandra had done a lot of thinking—about him, and them—since their short adventure together in the wards before the *Normandy* had departed for the Horsehead Nebula. She had come to the conclusion that what she felt for him wasn’t love; it was admiration, along with respect. It didn’t hurt her opinion of him that he fit her definition of ‘bad boy’, a character trait she had always found appealing – the fact that she usually equated that trait with men less than half his age did nothing to diminish his charm.

“So, where’re we going first?” she asked.

“After we stop by tha safe ’ouse an’ drop some of our gear, I wan’ ter go back inta Quinton Yang’s neighborhood in Delta Ward, see if ’e’s still alive. If ’e is, then we see if ’e can lead us back ter Solem Dal’Serah,” came the ready response. “Once I find Dal’Serah, I’ll simply persuade ’im ter divulge Vido’s location, either before or after I skin’im alive.”

Patton smiled at Zaeed as she commented, “You make it sound like it’s going to be really simple, Zaeed. I think you may be underestimating the odds against us.”

“Nonsense. Dal’Serah’s a walking deadman, Luv… ’e just don’t know it, is all.”

Sandra shook her head slightly at Massani calling her ‘Luv’… first time she’d heard him refer to her in that way; thinking about it for a few moments as they walked on in silence, she decided she rather liked it. Certainly much better than ‘Darlin’ or ‘Sweetheart’, she thought.

Rachaél Shepard and Liara T’Soni had left the *Normandy* right after Massani and Patton, only they were seated inside a UT-47a shuttlecraft piloted by Lieutenant Sherri Morse, on their way to Tiberius Towers on the Silversun Strip. The couple had loaded most of their personal possessions—the majority of which belonged to Liara—into the remaining space inside the crew compartment, as Captain Cody had sent nearly all of Shepard’s gear to the apartment when he moved into the Deck One Loft.

Rachaél had been nervous and on edge ever since the ship had docked. Her meeting with Admiral
Hackett concerning his desire for her to remain in the Alliance still loomed in her immediate future; it was bound to be an unpleasant conversation, as she had not changed her mind and Liara had loved the idea of Shepard retiring to Thessia with her. She also needed to meet with the full Council regarding staying on as a Spectre, but she wanted to meet privately with Councilor Tevos first; of all the Councilors, Tevos had always stood firmly on Shepard’s side during her campaign against the Collectors and the war with the Reapers. That Shepard’s solution to ending the war had caused the loss of her physical life had not been an easy thing for Tevos to accept, but Rachaël’s return to the real world in a cloned body would no doubt be even more difficult for her to believe.

Lieutenant Morse gingerly set the shuttle down on the roof of Shepard’s penthouse apartment, leaving the mass effect core ‘hot’ in order to minimize the weight sitting on the structure. Shepard and Liara quickly unloaded the crew compartment and waved farewell to the lieutenant as she reengaged the thrusters and lifted off to return to the ship. As the shuttle cleared the rooftop, Shepard and Liara began transferring their possessions in through the emergency exit.

Once everything was inside, Rachael sealed the hatch, then joined Liara in finding places for the clothing and other items they had brought with them. As she walked past the main floor lounge towards the huge windows, her eyes caught sight of something she feared she would never see again; sitting on top of the concert grand piano was a small display case, within which resided a pair of metal tags on a beaded chain. Her eyes instantly teared up as she picked the item up and sat on the bench; it was her Alliance dog tags, retrieved from the snowy wastes of Alchera by Liara, given to her after their mission on the Shadow Broker’s ship over Hagalaz.

A pair of hands settled gently on her shoulders, followed by a kiss on the cheek; Liara dropped one hand to place an arm around Rachael’s waist as she took a seat beside her. “I had almost forgotten you had those, Siame. Captain Cody must have sent that over, along with your N7 helmet, which is sitting on a shelf in the armor compartment next to the master bedroom.” She gave her promised another little kiss, then remarked, “That silver globe you retrieved from Kopis is sitting on the bookshelf near your desk.”

Shepard sighed as she returned the dog tags to their place on top of the piano. “Edie and Corporal Andrews did an admirable job of putting everything away when they brought it all over from the ship. I must remember to thank them for being so efficient.”

“How are you doing, Rachael, really?” Liara moved the hand sitting on Shepard’s hip to begin gently stroking the small of her back. “You’ve been really quiet all day.”

Rachael turned her head to study the intense blue eyes. “Honestly? I’m not sure, Ionúin álaimn. It feels so strange … almost surreal … to be back in this apartment and ready to leave the Alliance.” Her eyes traveled the lower floor as she continued, “It seems like ages since we had our party here. She huffed out a small laugh as she thought back. “Zaeed and Garrus running around trying to set up extra security for me? Tali so drunk she was nearly puking in her helmet? Grunt refusing entry to any and all? Everyone had a great time, and then …” Rachael’s voice hitched as she leaned her head on Liara’s shoulder. “… we all went back to the war.”

“It was a wonderful interlude, my love,” she replied with a quiet giggle. “I’ll never forget the look on James Vega’s face when I lifted him off the floor with my biotics.”

Rachael joined Liara with a quiet laugh of her own. “James cooking eggs next morning for a bunch of people with severe hang-overs was beyond hilarious. I don’t think he had any takers.”

“We had a wonderful time ourselves, my darling,” came the shy comment.

“That we did.” The pair continued to sit in silence for several minutes, simply enjoying their together
time. Shepard finally broke the quiet mood. “It’s getting close to lunch time. I’m going to see if I can make an appointment to meet with the Asari Councilor.”

Liara smiled as she agreed before adding, “You also need to contact Admiral Hackett, my love. I’m sure Captain Cody reported the Normandy’s arrival, so he’s no doubt waiting to hear from you.”

Shepard’s face clouded for a moment. “What the hell am I supposed to say to him, Blue? I spent nearly two years of my life in a damned computer memory core and he expects me to simply step back into uniform like nothing happened?”

“You know I’ll support you, Rachaël … whatever your final decision.”

“Oh, I am so done, Liara. I just need to figure out how to tell Hackett … so he doesn’t end up hating me … or you.”

“He won’t hate you, Shepard. He may be disappointed, but he has to understand that you’ve made enough sacrifices for the sake of the Alliance. Let someone else take up the mantle.”

♦ DELTA WARD · CITADEL ♦

Zaeed and Sandra had dropped most of their gear in the safe house Captain Cody had arranged for their use while they hunted for Solem Dal’Serah. They had to reestablish their ‘tail’ on low-level operative Quinton Yang, who had been spooked when Patton had fired her rifle at a cloaked assassin attempting to permanently end Zaeed’s career as an independent gun for hire.

After leaving their safe house, they walked to the neighborhood where they’d last seen Yang; while Sandra kept watch from the roof of the same two-story building she had used as an observation post before, Zaeed actually went to the apartment and knocked on the door. After knocking a second time … then a third time with no response, he activated his comm-link and said, “No answer ’ere, an’ it doesn’t look as if there’s been anyone ’ere fer a few days … maybe even as long as it took us ter travel ter the Horse Head Nebula an’ return.”

“How secure is the lock?” Patton wanted to know.

“Hang on a sec …” Massani tried the couple of hacks he knew from the old days, but the landlord of this place had fortified the entry doors with modern locks featuring relatively secure interfaces. “Looks like we’d need a better ’acker fer dis lock, Luv. I’m comin’ back down. We’ll do a bit of snoopin’ elsewhere.”

“Meetcha in the street,” came the soft reply. Patton cautiously got to her feet; after going through the rooftop-access airlock, she left the building and walked out into the narrow alley beside the building. Catching up to Massani as he paused across from a narrow footpath, she watched as he ran his fingertips over the shadowed wall of the squat warehouse across the lane from the walkway. Looking up as she stopped beside him, he said, “Here’s where that bloody batarian’s bullet landed, Luv.”

Patton nodded as Massani dropped his hand. Looking down the narrow lane, she replied, “I’d bet he’s still hanging about, but I’ve not noticed any sign of an active cloaking generator.”

Massani stood and looked down the lane; calling up an area map of the neighborhood on his omnitool, he studied the layout for a few moments. Shutting down his tool, he said, “This way, Master Guns,” and began walking, staying well out of the way of the few people moving about; as the old merc reached the point where Yang himself had turned and disappeared after being spooked
by the pair of rifle shots, Patton followed close behind, constantly scanning all the while for anyone in the areas on either side and behind. This neighborhood was a virtual labyrinth of tight footpaths and alleys, all haphazardly strewn between featureless, narrowly spaced buildings, with very few people about.

“How in the hell does anyone find their way around in here, Zaeed?” Patton didn’t care for the closeness of the place—there was no cover to speak of—even the building entrances were flush with the outer walls, so there were no alcoves in which to hide.

Massani chuckled mirthlessly and replied, “I expect the denizens ’ereabouts never ’ave ter go far … for work, or food. Everyone stays in their own little corner of ’ell down ’ere, Luv.” After taking a careful look around the corner of a small manufacturing plant, he looked back at Patton to say, “Looks clear … Le’s push on.”

♦ ASARI COUNCILOR’S OFFICE, PRESIDIUM · CITADEL ♦

“By the Goddess! Can it really be true?” Councilor Raesia Tevos held fingertips to her lips in near disbelief at the news that had just been brought to her by her aide.

The expression on Dalis Shegos’ face mirrored the disbelief of her mistress. “I saw her image with my own eyes, heard her voice with my own ears, all while she stood beside Lady Liara T’Soni.” Dalis’ eyes were glossy with unshed tears at the incredible news. “By the grace of the Goddess, it seems Rachael Shepard has been returned to us, Mistress. She requested an appointment for a private audience with you, at your earliest convenience. She only asks that Lady Liara be allowed to accompany her.”

Tevos stood in frozen indecision for only a moment. “Earliest convenience? Does that mean she’s here? On the Citadel?” Receiving a confirmatory nod from Dalis, she said, “Clear my afternoon schedule, Dalis, and ask Nizia to come in. Then contact Shepard …” she paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. “Contact Shepard, inform her that I look forward to meeting with her and Dr T’Soni as soon as she can get here.”

As Dalis left to carry out Tevos’ instructions, the asari took a seat behind her desk, thinking back to a time when humanity was still learning about the peoples of the galaxy. It had been at least five years since Commander Shepard had visited her in these very offices, after an extremely stressful and frustrating meeting with the full council.

The human ambassador, Donnel Udina, had seemingly conspired privately with Sparatus and Valern to ground Shepard and the Normandy SR-1 in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to prevent her from using the Mu Relay to access Ilos. I actually feared she would strike Udina for his intransient refusal to believe in her. It seemed strange to me that Udina would stand against her … He was so … condescending.

Her musings were interrupted by the arrival of her First, Huntress Nizia Tenir. “What may I do for you, Mistress?”

Tevos mentally shook herself, returning to the here and now. Looking up at her personal guard, she waved her hand to indicate a chair in front of the desk. “Sit, Nizia. There is some happy news … news I hope has not yet been picked up by the extranet.” Noting Nizia’s puzzled expression, she took a deep, calming breath, before looking directly at the huntress and saying softly, “She’s alive, Nizia! By the grace of the Goddess, Commander Shepard is alive. She is on her way to see me … to see us!”
Tenir’s expression of shocked surprise quite nearly mirrored that of Dalis when she had told Tevos of receiving the call. “That sounds like … Do miracles still occur, Mistress?

Tevos nodded her head as she replied, “In this case, it would seem quite likely that miracles can … and do … still occur, Nizia; I’d have to say that Rachaél Shepard’s survival appears to be just such an occurrence … assuming it truly is Shepard.”

It had taken Shepard and Liara only twenty-five minutes to reach the outer door of Councilor Tevos’ offices. Shepard was dressed very informally for a visit to one of the most powerful politicians on the Citadel; she was quite well acquainted with the asari councilor, having visited privately several times subsequent to her first, rather spur-of-the-moment visit in 2183. Her second reason for casual wear was far more practical – she had visited the Citadel many times since Saren had led the geth attack on Eden Prime, and didn’t wish to be noticed while traveling between her apartment and the Presidium; the passage of nearly two years’ time and casual clothes in place of her more familiar attire of armor and weapons would effectively allow her to hide in plain sight.

Dalis Shegos had waited until the outer door was closed and locked before abandoning decorum to enthusiastically embrace Shepard. “Goddess be praised. I never imagined I’d be able to speak with you again, Commander.” Releasing Shepard, she turned and bowed to Liara, saying, “Lady T’Soni, it is a pleasure to see you again.” Inclining her head and indicating the way with her hand, she said, “If you will follow me, the councilor is waiting to meet with you.”

Rachaél and Liara followed Dalis into Tevos’ nicely appointed office, with its small sitting area containing a comfortable couch, small table and a pair of lounge chairs off to the right, and the familiar desk at the back of the room, where Nizia Tenir and Raesia Tevos rose from their chairs to greet her and Liara; Tevos greeted Shepard first, with her hands held out palms up in the traditional greeting.

Rachaél laid her hands on those of the asari, saying, “Councilor Tevos. It is my good fortune to once again be able to speak with you after so many months.” She withdrew her hands, then greeted Nizia in a similar manner. The pair extended the same greeting to Liara, after which Tevos bade them all to move to the sitting area where they could be more comfortable. Speaking to Dalis, Tevos asked her aide to bring a tray of snacks and beverages for her guests.

Tevos used her eyes to inspect Rachaél intently—as did Nizia—looking for the slightest hint that this woman, despite the presence of Liara T’Soni, might be a fraud. “I’m sorry, but this is very difficult to accept ... a second time, Commander. Can you explain how your presence here is even remotely possible?”

Shepard paused in her response as Dalis brought in a large tray containing the requested snacks and beverages. Liara made a cup of tea for herself and poured a cup of coffee for Rachaél, from which she sipped before answering the question.

Unsure how to begin, she took a deep breath and plunged in. “I’m sure you must remember the first time I visited the three of you in this office, Councilor. Ambassador Udina had conspired with Sparatus and Valern to prevent me from going to Ilos.” Taking another sip from her cup, she added, “You entered my mind, after assurances from Nizia that I had no intention of harming you. You saw what happened to me on Mindoir in 2170, as well as what I did on Torfan in 2178. Because of my background, there are many that still claim I didn’t attempt to warn the 305,000 or so batarians on Aratoht before I destroyed the Viper Nebula relay.”

Whispering, “Rachaél,” Liara gently wrapped her fingers around her Siame’s upper arm in an attempt to calm her.
Tevos slowly nodded her head, then said, “All of what you say is true, but that does not answer my question. It was my understanding that Commander Shepard died when she fired the Crucible.”

A smile crossed Shepard’s face, bordering on a smirk. “I know. Which is exactly why I brought up that particular instance. The story is crazy; I very much doubt you’ll believe that I was somehow cast into the memory banks of the Normandy and that the crew has been on the hunt ever since to locate the cloning facility Cerberus used to bring me back to life after my death over Alchera.” She chuckled at the look of incredulity that crossed the councilor’s face. “That truly is the long and short of it … they located a fresh clone, brought it to the Normandy, and downloaded my consciousness into it … which also explains the total lack of battle scars and my youthful appearance.”

“That’s not possible!” Tevos’ eyes were wide with disbelief as the thought struck her, Goddess! Sha’ira told me of Shepard’s existence in the Normandy’s computer, and that Liara and Garrus were searching for the Cerberus facility that brought her back, but I never expected them to succeed! “Why did no one tell the council of your presence in the Normandy, if this was the case?”

Liara looked at Tevos with a pitying gaze. “Forgive my bluntness, Councilor, but do you really think us so naïve? You are sitting here, staring at her physical manifestation, yet still in disbelief. Do you honestly think we could have convinced anyone that the hologram before them was truly Shepard and not some AI created out of sheer desperation to not lose the hero of the galaxy?”

Tevos looked at Liara, challenge in her eyes. “And what makes you so confident that simply having someone sitting before me who looks like Shepard would change that conclusion in any way? How do you know she’s not some Cerberus imposter, cloned while they had the original Shepard?”

“Fair enough, Councilor.” Liara smiled. “So we are back to Shepard’s reminder of your original meld. She’s the genuine article … she truly is my Siame, my promised. And she is more than willing to allow Nizia or you to meld with her, if that is what’s required to convince you of the truth. If Rachaél was not who she claims to be, do you believe she could hide her true identity from you in a meld?”

Tevos eyes went wide at Liara’s statement as she stared intently at the commander. “In my heart, I truly want to believe that you are Commander Shepard, as you say, only … it all seems so fantastical.”

Rachaél smiled as she replied, “Councilor … Raesia. I could sit here and tell the entire tale …” she paused to look at Liara, the devotion in her eyes on display for all to see. “… Our tale, if there was sufficient time. I daresay an imposter would not be so willing a subject for a memory meld, and yet, I freely offer you that privilege. I have absolutely nothing to hide … from you, or anyone.”

Finishing her coffee and setting the mug on the serving tray, she concluded, “I believe you will discover that seeing my recent history through my eyes will be most enlightening.”

Returning her gaze to Liara, she added, “As I told you at my first visit, you and Nizia will most likely see things of a personal nature, to me, and Dr T’Soni. I will trust in your discretion today, just as I did then.”

Tevos nodded. “Our word is our bond, Commander. Your secrets are safe with us.”

Shepard allowed Liara to move away from her on the couch in order to keep from having physical contact with her; Nizia moved from her chair to sit beside Shepard on the side away from Liara. Taking the commander’s hand in her own, she said, “This will only be a light meld, Shepard. When you are ready?”

Rachaél leaned back, her head resting comfortably on the deeply cushioned backrest, and closed her
eyes. As soon as she sensed the now recognizable feeling of pressure on her consciousness, Rachael dropped her barriers to allow the huntress entry to her mind. After a few familiarizing exchanges and a general survey of the commander’s thoughts and intentions, Nizia found and pressed against a barrier Shepard was a bit reluctant to drop. Rachael warned Tenir of the physical pain she had felt during her run to the beam in London and the events she was about to witness, before she dropped the wall guarding her memories of the Reapers final assault on humanity.

Tenir squirmed a bit as she watched … and felt … visions from a nightmare—Shepard telling an injured Liara to get clear on the *Normandy*, being struck by a glancing blow from Harbinger’s main weapon, riding the beam to the Citadel, encountering the Illusive Man, the pain from a combination of third-degree burns, multiple gunshot wounds, a fractured leg and several fractured ribs; facing the choices presented by the Leviathan construct, diving into the green energy stream, regaining conscious thought inside the *Normandy* computer—until Tenir felt she’d seen more than enough. She slowly withdrew from Shepard’s mind, a look of amazement on her face as she reopened her eyes.

“You didn’t stay long enough to witness the main event,” Shepard stated matter-of-factly.

“I don’t see the necessity of doing so, Nara. Only Commander Shepard could have endured the things I witnessed. I will be interested in hearing from the councilor the rest of your story after you have shared your mind with her.”

Tevos slowly reopened her eyes as she withdrew her thoughts from the mind of the person whom she was now convinced, beyond any doubt, was Commander Rachael Shepard of the Systems Alliance Navy, and the first human appointed as a Council Spectre. She was still clutching Rachael’s left hand as the woman opened her eyes, turned her head and gave the councilor a tired smile. “I think by now you must agree I had one hell of a ride.”

Tevos spoke quietly, saying, “By the Goddess, Shepard. You are fortunate … no, we … all of us, are fortunate … that you didn’t succumb to insanity during your time within the *Normandy’s* memory core. And the Reapers … these … Repositories, as you now refer to them … that you were able to persuade them all, particularly Harbinger, to assist you in all this is a truly amazing accomplishment, one I would never have believed possible if I hadn’t just seen the past two years of your existence through your eyes and memories.”

Shepard let go of Raesia’s hand and slowly stood, putting both arms above her head to stretch. With a huge sigh, she dropped her arms and declared, “I actually became quite adroit at moving around in the memory core. If it had become necessary, I could have easily flown and fought the *Normandy* by myself – no organic assistance needed.”

“It will take me a bit of time to sort through everything you’ve shown me, Commander, but I do remember seeing that bit of information. I’m glad Liara and Garrus were able to find the clones for your use, but … were you a clone the first time … after Cerberus resurrected you? That part was unclear to me.”

“After Alchera, when Miranda brought me back from death, the person you knew as Rachael Shepard was truly human … truly me, with a few added parts. My injuries from my fall to the planet’s surface required cloned legs and an arm.” Looking down at herself, she used her hands and fingertips to sweep down her torso and legs as she added, “However, this body is totally a clone, grown from samples taken from my original form. There are several more in storage aboard Harbinger, along with a copy of my neural programing as it existed the moment before my transfer into this body.”
Shepard picked up a plate and selected a variety of the fish, cheeses and bread from the platters brought in earlier by Dalis; she offered the filled plate to Liara, who gratefully accepted it and began eating; Rachaël then filled a second plate, which she offered to Tevos, who accepted with a tired smile. “Thank you, Commander. I see all you have endured has not negatively affected your consideration for those around you.”

“No matter what befalls me, I will never take my anger or frustration out on my friends, Councilor.” As she spoke, she filled two glasses with Elasa, handed one to Liara and the other to Tevos, before filling a glass for herself and sitting on the couch beside her loniúin álaimh; Huntress Tenir followed Shepard’s example by also filling a plate for herself and sitting next to the councilor.

As they all busied themselves with replenishing spent calories, Tevos asked, “So what now, Commander? I could see in your mind a rather strong disinclination to remain in the Alliance Navy, but why would you also be reluctant to remain a Spectre?”

Shepard could see in Tevos’ expression that leaving the Alliance or the Spectres was not an outcome the councilor desired. After taking a bite of smoked tuinnín, followed by a sip of Elasa, Rachaël replied softly, “At this moment, I really am ready to retire, Councilor. I’ve given my life for the people of the galaxy … twice. After the first time, I spent two years on a metal slab as a Cerberus lab experiment; this last time, I spent nearly two years trying to keep my sanity in the Normandy’s computer core.” She looked down for a moment, appearing to study the glass in her hand. “I’ve been in the Alliance Navy since I was 18 years old.” Looking back up at the councilor, she nearly whispered, “Including the two years Cerberus took to rebuild my body, I’ve been in for sixteen years … There are officers in the Alliance with twice that amount of time who haven’t seen what I have or had to survive even half the shit I dealt with. But, I still need to speak with Admiral Hackett, let him know what I’m thinking.”

Tevos’ smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I would not think of asking you to remain a Spectre if you are unwilling to do so, Rachaël, but I would ask that you give the matter some more thought before making a final decision. As a Spectre, you have much greater freedom to deal with situations as you see fit. However, if you truly are intent on retiring to a life on Thessia, I will do everything in my power to enable you to do just that.” Shifting her gaze to Liara, she added, “You have been blessed by the Goddess, Liara. Few are those that are granted a chance at the happiness you have found—to have been given a second opportunity is truly a gift.”

“A gift I give thanks for each day, Councilor.” Liara placed a hand briefly on Shepard’s thigh as she sipped a bit of Elasa from her glass. After glancing at Rachaël, she focused on the councilor and concluded, “It is something I will never take for granted.”

♦ DELTA WARD · CITADEL ♦

Quinton Yang left the small manufacturing plant by the service entrance and nonchalantly strolled around the building to the front, pausing to gaze at the mix of numerous turians, batarians and salarians calmly going about their various pursuits, blissfully ignorant of the shady undercurrents taking place all around them. Those that even noticed the diminutive human were not inclined to look too hard or for too long, which suited Yang perfectly – the less notice he received, the better.

Once the Normandy, with Zaeed Massani aboard, had departed for places unknown, Solem Dal’Serah’s lieutenants had reassigned the low-level operative to a collections route in the poorer areas of the neighborhoods around Dal’Serah’s headquarters. Yang had been accompanied by a batarian enforcer during his first couple of visits to each place, a calculated move by Dal’Serah to ensure Yang wouldn’t get hassled during his visits—he could get in, get the payment transfer, and
get out—all in a matter of minutes.

The transactions were made on an unregistered omnitool to ensure anonymity for the Blue Suns – payments made by the various business owners may just as well have been dropped into a black hole, as they couldn’t be reported as a cost of doing business. The assignment was going well for Yang; he didn’t feel the need to be continuously looking over his shoulder – just hit each business in turn, record the payments and give the omnitool to a designated Blue Sun lieutenant at the end of each day.

Yang had finished his route a bit early today, and none of the shakedown targets had bothered to give him any shit about what he was doing, perhaps realizing the futility of complaining to someone with absolutely no power to change things for the better. As he turned to walk down the alleyway to where he’d been told to report today, his stomach seemed to leap into his throat on its way to an exit – Krin’lo Pakbagoh was lounging against a low fence that ran between a pair of small factories.

Quinton hadn’t seen Pakbagoh since the batarian enforcer had dragged him in to meet with Solem Dal’Serah to answer questions about his sighting of Zaeed Massani near the Alliance docks; he had honestly hoped to never set eyes on the big batarian again. Thinking, Shit! He’s seen me. Nothing for it now but to go talk to him. Dammit! I knew today was going too well. The now nervous Yang watched Pakbagoh closely as he slowly approached the batarian, wondering just why Dal’Serah had sent his top lieutenant to collect the omnitool he carried.

The batarian stood away from the fence and took a couple of steps towards Yang. As Quinton stopped in front of him and held up the omnitool, he said, “Not here for the shakedown credits, Yang. The boss asked me to find you, ask you a few questions.” Lowering his hand, Yang waited, thinking it simply better to remain silent until he heard more. “Word on the streets hereabouts is Massani’s back in the area … seems he’s looking for you. The boss is wondering why that might be. So am I.”

Yang’s stomach was already threatening to erupt … knowing Massani might be on his trail again was the last thing he needed to hear. “Zaeed? I didn’t even know he was back on the station, Mr Pakbagoh … honest.” Yang looked around nervously, as if expecting the old merc to jump out of the shadows at any second. “Why in ’ell would he be looking for me, anyways?” He concluded with a nervous laugh, “I don’t have anything he needs.”

Krin’lo tilted his head to the right as he answered, “Perhaps he thinks you can lead him to Dal’Serah. Massani has vowed to kill the boss and ship his head to Santiago in a box.”

“Not possible for Massani, or anyone else, to follow me to the boss … only time I was there was with you, and I had a bag over my head going in and out,” Quinton whined in denial. “ Couldn’t find my way back there if I wanted to.”

Pakbagoh crossed his arms as he placed a foot behind him and leaned back on that hip. With his head still tilted to the right, he conceded, “Okay … but you really need to be on your guard, Yang. Massani will stop at nothing to kill the boss. If he finds you, he’ll do whatever he feels is necessary to squeeze the information out of you; even if you have nothing of any use to him.”

Quinton whimpered, “I really doubt I can keep that old merc from finding me, Mr Pakbagoh. I don’t have anywhere to hide down here. Perhaps I could have some help … maybe one the enforcers that was with me when I started the route.” The unhappy man regarded the batarian hopefully.

“Not going to happen, Yang, at least, not openly. There may be, or may not be, someone watching from the sidelines while using a personal cloaking shield.” The batarian smiled as he concluded, “You won’t know if there’s someone actually close-by, and neither will Massani. With a bit of luck,
we may be able to eliminate him for good.” With that, Krin’lo Pakbagoh turned around and walked away, leaving Quinton Yang to meet with the Blue Suns collector that was just arriving.

As Pakbagoh left, a flickering outline, invisible to most eyes without special filters, moved to follow him. Zaeed Massani stayed with the batarian while Sandra Patton continued to monitor Quinton Yang. During the impromptu meeting between the batarian and diminutive human, Sandra had been close enough to the pair to record everything that was said; she whispered a query through her comm link to Zaeed as she stayed in the deepest shadow she could find in the narrow pathway. “You’re not planning on going in after Dal’Serah alone, are you?”

Massani didn’t answer immediately; he was taking a great deal of care to avoid making any noise as he cautiously moved through the gloomiest areas he could find. When the batarian turned left into an alley, Zaeed broke into a near noiseless trot until he arrived at the entrance; carefully peering around the corner, he watched as Pakbagoh rounded another corner about fifteen meters away. He quietly answered Patton as he trotted the distance, only to draw up short where the batarian had disappeared. “I just need ter see where ’e’s going, Master Guns. I don’t fancy committin’ suicide.”

In an effort to lessen his profile despite his cloaking shield, Zaeed crouched, going to a knee before easing his head past the edge of the building; drawing back, Massani stood and ran back to the previous turn, slipping around that corner just as Pakbagoh emerged from the footpath entrance he had just previously taken. Massani’s curiosity was now well and thoroughly piqued—the batarian had been standing at the entrance to a building several levels high, where he had used his omnitool to input a passcode, apparently in a failed attempt to unlock and open the hatch. He now turned to his right and strode down the narrow street, pushing aside people that failed to get out of his way in a timely manner.

Thinking, Damn if that ain’t odd behavior, even fer a fuckin’ squint, he moved back to the footpath entrance the batarian had just exited. As before, he went to one knee as he peered around the corner, taking a bit more time to observe everything within.

The haptic lock on the entrance hatch appeared out of place for this neighborhood, as if it were protecting something of great value or someone of great importance … or both. There were several miniature cameras mounted at a height of three to four meters on the sides of the buildings, guarding the approach to the hatch, along with the retreat to the street. It all seemed a bit over the top, which indicated just one thing to Massani—he had definitely found the main offices for the Blue Suns on the Citadel. To be sure, there were outposts in each of the other wards, but Zaeed was certain Pakbagoh had led him to the place where he was most likely to encounter Solem Dal’Serah.

Activating his comm link, he called Patton as he marked this location on his omnitool—he wanted to make sure he’d be able to return unerringly without having to search. “Hey Patton … I found the place. I’m comin’ back out ter where I left you.”

“Negative, Zaeed. A Blue Suns batarian met with Yang … took the omnitool from him. I’m following Yang now … hoping he’ll lead me to whatever rat hole he’s calling home these days. This shouldn’t take long—head on back to the safe house—I’ll meet you there. We can get cleaned up, go have dinner and come up with an action plan for dealing with Dal’Serah.”

Zaeed smiled. “Sounds good, Luv. See ya soon.”
Becoming The Shadow Broker

Not all girls are made of sugar and spice and all things nice. Some are made of witchcraft and wolf and a little bit of vice. — Nikita Gill

AP – Armor Piercing Ammunition
Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Ionúin álainn – Beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Mo cheann geallta – My promised one (Gaelic)
OSD – Optical Storage Device, analogous to compact data disks of the early twenty-first century
Siame – “One who is all’, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
Verse – Merc slang for the Attican Traverse

♦ ALLIANCE SAFE HOUSE · CITADEL ♦

Zaeed Massani had never liked waiting – for anything, or anyone, something that would be easy for an outside observer to recognize from the way the old merc paced about in the Alliance safe house assigned to him and Master Gunner Sergeant Sandra Patton. They had each gone separate ways after tracking and locating Quinton Yang, a low-level Blue Suns courier and Krin’lo Pakbagoh, Solem Dal’Serah’s number two on the Citadel.

The small transmitter Patton had attached to the collar of Yang’s shirt the previous month was still passively answering omnitool queries, accurately sending its location and altitude in transmissions lasting just one to two microseconds. Almost unbelievably to Zaeed, Quinton was still wearing the shirt he had on when Patton clipped the small tracker to his collar—either Yang had no other shirts to wear, or Zaeed and Sandra had received the luck of the draw; after Zaeed had tried knocking on his apartment door today, Patton had been close enough to Yang to pick up the low-power signal, allowing her and Zaeed to follow him to his unexpected meeting with Pakbagoh. After clandestinely watching the batarian talk to Yang, Zaeed trailed the enforcer while Patton stayed with Yang.

The trouble now was that Patton had yet to return from following Yang, and she hadn’t contacted Zaeed since she’d told him what she was doing; enough time had now passed since then to have Zaeed increasingly worried about her safety.

He had just about made up his mind to go back into the wards to search for her when he heard a noise at the door. Pulling his ever present heavy pistol, he aimed for the center of the door and waited. After a few seconds, the panels parted and retracted into the bulkheads, revealing … an empty doorway. Zaeed growled, “Patton?”

An obviously fatigued voice responded quietly, “Put the weapon down, Zaeed. It’s me …” The Marine, standing beside the doorway, waved an arm with an empty hand past the opening, then slowly moved into view, staggering as she attempted to lift one leg past the threshold, prompting Zaeed to quickly close the distance and grab her under her arms to keep her from falling on her face. As he half-carried the gunner sergeant inside, her legs gave up their battle with the station’s gravity, causing the old merc to grunt with the increased load on his arms.

“Sorry, Zaeed,” she gasped, her breath soft in his ear. “I think … I’m gonna hafta take … a raincheck on our dinner.”
Massani was now bearing Patton’s full weight, including her armor and weapons. Holding her tightly to his chest, he turned around and half dragged, half carried her to a chair close by, there to gingerly lower her to a sitting position. “What da ’ell ’appened out there, Master Guns?” He placed a hand on her cheek, trying to keep calm as he attempted to discover the cause of her apparent exhaustion.

Patton sighed. “Got spotted by a goddamned squint … sonovabitch was cloaked. Shot me in the chest … pistol, I think. Armor stopped it, but … impact caused me to fall from a roof. Managed to break my fall on a stack of crates below, but I think I wrenched my lower back as I landed … really hurts to walk.”

Zaeed moved to the small kitchen, where he filled a cup with water; returning, he held it out to her.

“Thanks,” she whispered after drinking it down.

“Bastard din’t follow you ’ere, did ’e?”

Sandra shook her head in reply. “Still had my cloaking generator … I took three corners—just about all I could walk—then laid in wait for him behind some cargo containers. Dropped him with a headshot as he came around the building looking for me.”

While she was talking, Zaeed unfastened her armor plates; leaning her forward, he pulled her backplate and rifle up and away before pushing her back into the chair. When she began to protest, Massani’s stopped her with a concerned voice. “Listen, Luv. We got ter get dis armor off you, make sure that bullet really did bounce offen it, okay?” He crouched in front of her, unfastened the bindings for her shin guards and cuisses, removed them and her boots and set them all aside. As her chestplate was already unfastened, he pulled it away, inspected it closely, then placed it with the backplate. “Bullet chipped the center of your chestplate, Luv … damned lucky for you it weren’t an AP round. Think you can stand fer a few?”

By way of reply, she slowly got to her feet with one hand holding the small of her back. “Damn! Hurts like hell … it’s probably gonna be black and blue by morning.” Handing the empty cup to him, she asked, “Anything stronger in this place?”

Zaeed chuckled. “Let me just take a look … while I do that, ’ow ’bout you shed that underarmor shirt so we can take a look at your back … maybe apply some medigel.”

As he returned to the kitchen, Sandra slowly moved to the bathroom. After relieving herself, she grabbed one of her equipment bags and dragged it back to the chair. Zaeed returned with the cup, now holding a shot of whiskey. “You’re a lifesaver, Massani,” she said as she took the cup; after draining it in two swallows, she handed it back to him, then rummaged in her gear bag for a moment. After retrieving a black sweatshirt and a small tube of medigel, both of which she handed to Zaeed, Patton grabbed the bottom edge of her under armor shirt and raised it to her midriff; turning her back on Massani, she finished tugging the tight fabric over her head and off her arms, leaving Zaeed staring at her totally bare back. “Okay,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Spread some medigel on that spot for me, Zaeed … ought to be really visible by now.

Zaeed could see a relatively large area of Patton’s lower back was darker than the surrounding area. “You’re right, Luv. Gonna be one hellova bruise.” He squeezed a generous amount of medigel into the palm of his left hand; reaching around, he placed his right forearm across her collar bones in order to grab her left shoulder. Saying, “Bend at the waist, Luv, while I help support ya,” he placed his left hand on her bruised back and gently massaged the gel into the skin as she leaned into his right forearm.
“Grinding out, ‘Damn! That’s cold,’” through gritted teeth, she endured the old merc’s ministrations with no further complaint. When he was done, he pulled her back upright and handed her the sweatshirt, then waited for her to pull it over her head before moving past her to the kitchen.

“Heaving a heavy sigh, she replied, ‘I’d like to hit a bar, Zaeed. I’m feeling a bit better now, and the medigel’s dulling my back pain to a tolerable level.’ She dug around in her pack again, this time pulling out a pair of black pants and light boots. Surprising Massani with her lack of self-consciousness, she quickly dropped and stepped out of her under armor pants, sat in the chair and pulled her pants and boots on, then stood and stuck out her hand. ‘Come on, let’s go eat.’”

Zaeed and Sandra found themselves in a small restaurant with a secluded dining area, away from the front door, bar and kitchen, with a moderate number of people enjoying quiet dinners. It was more upscale than some of the seedy bar and grills nearby while being less ostentatious than several of the local restaurants. Sandee thought it was a perfect place to have dinner while discussing how best to proceed against the Blue Suns now that Zaeed felt he’d discovered the location of Solem Dal’Serah’s main office.

Rather than downing his pint in three gulps as he usually did, Zaeed actually took moderate sips from his glass of English Stout as he spoke with Patton about her afternoon adventure tracking Quinton Yang. “The last thing Pakbagoh told Yang before ‘e left ‘im was ‘e might ‘ave someone usin’ a personal cloakin’ shield an’ watchin’ from the sidelines – looks like what plan wen’ into effect right away.” He chewed and swallowed a couple of forkfuls of scalloped potatoes—or whatever passed for potatoes in this restaurant—then took a swallow of stout from his glass before continuing. “Lucky fer you the sonovabitch didn’t ‘ave anythin’ ‘eavier than a pistol, an’ lucky fer me you killed ‘im – Pakbagoh won’t know which one ov us done it. Might make ‘im more careful goin’ forward, might not.”

Sandra had been quietly eating her meal of salad, grilled chicken breast with sautéed mushrooms and steamed rice, all accompanied by a couple of pints of red ale. Wincing slightly as she leaned back in her chair, she studied the old merc’s face for several moments as she thought about what he’d said. Taking another sip from her glass, she swallowed and conceded, “I expect Yang was already being shadowed by that bastard – probably ever since the Suns learned the Normandy had returned. I wouldn’t be surprised to discover they were hoping to end you right away, just so Dal’Serah could look good to Santiago.” After a few more bites, she added, “And I do believe they’ll exercise a helluva lot more care—probably place a second cloaked soldier on overwatch. Taking out the primary might result in the secondary taking one of us out; a damned squint concealed on overwatch is going to be right difficult for us to detect … I don’t like that thought at all.”

“I’m more worried about enterin’ that buildin’ undetected, Luv.” Zaeed paused to chew the last of his potatoes, followed by finishing the contents of his pint glass. “There’s cameras mounted up ‘igh, watchin’ that lane in both direcshuns … an’ I’d wager some ov ’em is infrared. Getting’ in is gonna be a bitch.”

Patton wiped her mouth with the linen napkin she’d placed in her lap as she thought about the problem. Returning her attention to the old merc, she mused, “Scuttlebutt on the ship has it that Specialist Traynor is quite well-versed in hacking most anything controlled by a computer. I’ll
Samantha Traynor moved through the scanner. When she caught sight of him, he waved her into the conference room and bade her to sit in the chair closest to him. Standing from his chair, he queried, “Coffee, or a cup of tea, Specialist.”

“A cup of tea would be appreciated, Sir.” Cody prepared a mug of tea, using the carafe of steaming hot water on the serving tray; after setting a mug in front of her, he topped up his coffee and retook his own chair.

Now seated, Sammy took a cautious sip from her mug, smiled nervously and said, “XO Adams said you wanted to see me, Sir?”

Leaning back in his chair, he replied, “Ms Traynor, I have a possible assignment ashore for you.”

Taking a sip of coffee, he continued, “Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton has requested some assistance with … a rather delicate operation she’s involved in with Zaeed Massani. She suggested that you might be perfect for the job she has in mind.”

Treynor crossed her arms under her chest as she asked, “What kind of operation are we talking about, Captain?”

Cody’s mouth was set in a firm line, corners turned up ever so slightly. “Specialist, I am aware of some of your history with Captain Yuán, from when you were both in an Alliance Spec Ops program; I understand you have some serious skills in clandestine hacking of computer systems, as well as anything connected to a computer or operated by a smart circuit. To say you are an absolute genius when it comes to working with cutting-edge comms gear is probably understating just how damned good you are.”

Sammy blushed slightly as she sipped her tea, then recrossed her arms as she looked at Cody and boldly said, “I appreciate the complements, but I don’t think you called me in here just to sing my praises, Sir.”

Cody grinned at this. “You’re correct, Specialist. Short explanation? Massani and Patton need to enter a building in a close-by section of Delta Ward. The approach to the front door is guarded … watched, actually … by a number of cameras mounted high on the surrounding buildings; Massani feels certain that a few of them are infrared, which means cloaking generators are nearly useless.”

Treynor could see exactly what her mission would be. “So, I’m guessing you’d like me to get them into that building unseen and undetected, Sir.”

“Something like that. You also have some serious hand-to-hand skills, and you don’t like batarians. You’ll fit in perfectly, but …” Cody sipped from his mug, as he glanced at the datapad, then concluded, “… I’m not ordering you to do this.” Pressing a control on the datapad, he added,
“Mission specific information,” as her omnitool activated in response. “I think you could use a few days liberty, Specialist.” Any hint of smile had left his features as he looked at her meaningfully. “Armor and weapons, Specialist. The Citadel is a dangerous place … nearly as hazardous as Omega, or so I’ve been told. One must be prepared for any eventuality, don’t you agree?”

Traynor smiled as she said, “Yes, Sir. Before I go, I would like to visit Iringù-Eßizkur. Do a bit of research on where I’ll be spending my leave.” As Cody stood up to leave, so did Sammy.

“Do what you need to do, Specialist. I’ll expect a progress report in twenty-four.”

“Yes, Sir.”

♦ SHEPARD’S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT · TIBERIUS TOWERS ♦

Rachaël and Liara, finishing a leisurely breakfast together before Shepard needed to leave for her meeting with Admiral Hackett onboard the SSV Orizaba, were talking about yesterday’s meeting with Asari Councilor Tevos. Rachaël felt as if virtually no time had passed since she had last been in such intimate contact with not only Raesia, but Huntress Nizia Tenir as well. “Seems like it was only a few days ago, Ionúin álainn, instead of a few years … there was such a familiarity to their … mental touch. So much different from your touch when you join with me, but familiar all the same.”

“I believe the difference you felt yesterday has to do with how you perceive the meld, Siame … whereas Raesia and Nizia were only there to observe, I am hopelessly in love with you. Even when I initiate a light meld, the intensity of my feelings color all that I do, and you return those feelings to me with every bit of your being.” The intensity of Liara’s smile rivaled a Thessian sunrise. “I’m glad you were willing to allow such a personal … invasion … of your memories from the end of the war, Rachaël, but make no mistake … you cannot offer yourself up to just any asari that requests it.”

Shepard chuckled as she rose from her stool. “I don’t know of any asari that would knowingly risk the ire of Dr Liara T’Soni by making such a request.” She leaned down and placed a chaste kiss on Liara’s top crest. With a heavy sigh, she left their kitchen behind, saying, “I have to get dressed for my meeting with the admiral, Mo cheann geallta. As much as I am not looking forward to it, it has to be done.”

“I know we discussed this last night, Rachaël,” Liara replied. “Are you sure you don’t want me to accompany you?”

“I’d love nothing better, Blue, but … this has to be a private meeting, officer to officer.”

♦ FLEET ADMIRAL STEVEN HACKETT’S OFFICE · SSV ORIZABA ♦

With a passionate kiss and a whispered “go with the Goddess”, her promised had bid her farewell as she’d entered the UT-47 shuttle from the Orizaba. The flight from the Citadel to the Alliance Dreadnaught, while taking nearly twenty minutes, had felt like an FTL flight of mere seconds to Shepard. In all too short a time, she found herself standing in the outer office of Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett, still not feeling any closer to a solution she could present to the old soldier that would make him comfortable.

“Commander Rachaël Shepard, here to meet with Admiral Hackett.” The auburn-haired woman, resplendent in dress blues, stood at parade rest in front of the desk behind which the admiral’s aide stared up at her in stunned silence. “Is there something wrong, Lieutenant?”
Recovering his powers of speech, he answered, “Commander?” He studied the terminal on his desk for several moments before looking up at Shepard to say, “My apologies, Ma’am. The admiral told me to expect you, but …”

Shepard smirked at the flustered man, saying, “… You weren’t sure I’d actually be here. Well, I promised Admiral Hackett I’d meet with him today, so I’d really appreciate you telling him I’m here.”

With an expression of awe plain on his face, the man signaled the admiral; Hackett’s reply was immediate. “He says you can go in Ma’am …” Indicating the door to the right, he added, “… pleasure to meet you.”

Still smiling, she turned and walked to the indicated door, which parted and slid aside at her approach. A hearty, “Come in, Commander, and welcome to the Orizaba,” was followed by a quiet chuckle as she moved through the doorway. As the door closed behind her, Hackett approached her, hands held out in greeting. “Dammit, Commander, you surely are a sight for sore eyes! I was beginning to think you’d be part of the Normandy computer forever.”

Grasping forearms with the man she had known seemingly forever, she greeted her mentor with a huge smile. Whatever her feelings about remaining in the Alliance Navy, Rachaél would never do anything to jeopardize her personal friendship with Steven Hackett. “Admiral … It has been a long time. It’s good to actually be out of the ship.”

Releasing one of her arms, he motioned to a pair of comfortable looking chairs. “Shall we sit?”

“Sounds good, Sir.” Hackett must have signaled a steward from the mess area; the sharp double-tap on a door on the far side of the compartment was followed by a woman in starched white bearing a large tray, on which stood a pair of mugs featuring the Alliance emblem emblazoned in blue, along with a tall silver pitcher, a couple of plates and a selection of snacks. She silently set the tray on the table between the chairs, quietly poured a measure of steaming coffee into each of the mugs, then bowed slightly towards the admiral and retreated the way she had arrived.

Hackett picked up both mugs; handing one to Shepard, he sat in one chair as she took a seat in the other with a murmured “Thank you, Sir.”

After taking a few sips from his own mug, the admiral fixed Shepard with an intense stare as he said, “So, Commander … you’ve expressed a desire to leave the Alliance in order to settle on Thessia with Dr T’Soni. After reading your file and your action report, I know what you’ve sacrificed for the good of the galaxy, not once, but twice. I cannot say I envy how you chose to end the Reaper war, especially given the choices laid out for you by that miserable construct, but you seem to have come through unscathed.”

Rachaél chuckled. “Actually, my original body was partially destroyed over Alchera, which is the reason Cerberus chose to create clones from my cells. There were parts of me that were grown in nutrient-filled vats, then grafted onto my torso. Along with a number of implants, including my eyes, I was the walking embodiment of a cyborg.” She paused as she thought back to that time … her conflict with the Collectors, and the Illusive Man. “As for what I am now? This body is completely a clone. Harbinger facilitated the transfer of … me, my soul—if that’s how you’d like to think about it—from the Normandy’s server into the blank mind in the skull of this creation.” Rachaél laughed lightly as she concluded, “The Harbinger of our destruction made me whole.”

Hackett had been sipping his coffee while Shepard spoke, listening to her words, watching her mannerisms, in a covert attempt to detect anything counterfeit or not quite right about this woman in Shepard’s dress blues. Gently clearing his throat, he said, “That’s an incredible tale, Commander.
Your report, cross-referenced with the one submitted by Captain Cody, is convincing, and not something I’d attribute to an imposter.”

Shepard smiled at the old warrior. “I realize it stretches the bounds of credibility, Sir; I find it hard to believe myself at times.” She had finished her coffee, so stood in order to pour herself another cupful and grab a couple of the snacks sitting on the tray. Retaking her seat, she sipped appreciatively, then offered, “However, Councilor Tevos has seen my mind; she joined with me yesterday, and right after my original return from the two years I spent on a metal table in the Illusive Man’s lab on Lazarus Station. She does not doubt the veracity of my story. Also bear in mind that T’Soni shares every last neuron in my head; she is completely convinced I am genuine.”

Hackett nodded his head as she finished speaking. “I’m convinced as well, Commander. So, what now? You indicated a desire to leave the Alliance behind … begin a new life on Thessia with Dr T’Soni. Is that still your desire?”

Shepard had been dreading this question ever since she woke up this morning. There was so much she wanted to do – so many places she wished to visit. With a deep sigh, she began. “Admiral, better than anyone else in the Alliance military, you know how much I’ve sacrificed in service to—not just humanity—but the entire galaxy. At times, it has seemed like no matter what I did, it was never enough for some, too much for others.” Rachael’s eyes were glistening with unshed tears as she continued to speak. “Honestly, what I want … is to have some time away … from everything … so I can make a rational decision. I want to travel to Thessia … I need to formalize my bond with Liara, with her father and friends in attendance. I want …” Shepard’s voice hitched as she thought of everything that had been denied her during her tenure in the military. In a trembling voice, she finished with, “I just want a chance to live … and enjoy my life, Admiral. Is that so wrong … or selfish?”

The raw emotions emanating from this woman were nearly palpable to Hackett … he had almost never had to deal with anyone on such a personal level. Choosing his words carefully, he looked intently at Shepard as he said in a quiet voice, “Commander… Rachael… I’d be lying if I told you I agreed with your desire to leave the Alliance behind, but neither will I sit here and attempt to convince you that staying is in your best interest, either. I wish there was something … anything … that was in my power to grant you. You already know about the promotion offer, and you’d have your choice of ship to command.” Hackett smiled slightly as he added, “Captain Cody told me about offering to step aside in order for you to captain the Normandy; he also said he wasn’t surprised you declined.”

Rachael smiled briefly at that. “The Normandy was a means to an end, before the Reapers and during the war. It’s a great ship, with a first-rate crew. I believe Bill Cody will do a fine job with her.”

Hackett chuckled. After several moments of silence, he spoke again. “Commander, I’m going to grant you sixty days of leave. You’re only just back physically, with no current assignment and nothing pending. I believe two months will give you a chance for some personal time alone with Liara and friends. Learn to live again.” The admiral stood from his chair, prompting Shepard to do the same. With an optimistic look, he affirmed, “And if you still wish to leave the Alliance at the end of your leave, I’ll personally sign the separation documents. I only ask that you truly consider what your sacrifices have meant to everyone still alive in this galaxy. You have a lot of friends in the Alliance, Shepard.” Hackett stuck out his hand in friendship, adding, “I’ll cut orders confirming your leave immediately. Now go get your bride-to-be and be off with you.”

Taking his hand, she replied in a tight voice. “Thank you, Sir. I appreciate all you’ve done for me.”
Iringù-Eßizkur had returned to the Widow System ahead of Harbinger, Žiuk’Durmah, the *Hong Kong II* and Asharru, all still in the Horse Head Nebula investigating known Cerberus sites and searching for any that had not been found. The Repository, her habitat area empty since T’Soni-Specialist Shadow Broker and Vakarian-General had left her behind to travel on the human ship, had not been assigned any specific task by First One, so had decided to return to Widow to wait. As it turned out, she was in the perfect place to be of service.

A query had been sent on her private channel – one that had not been used since she had been docked within Žiuk’Durmah during his return from the galaxy’s outer rim. She responded with a cautious, *Traynor-Specialist. To what do I owe the pleasure of once again communicating with you?*

*Iringù-Eßizkur, are you in-system?*

*If you are referring to the Widow System, the answer is affirmative.*

*Would it be possible for you to enter the pressurized portion of the Alliance docks and touchdown at the berth where Žiuk’Durmah was previously moored? I need to utilize Dr T’Soni’s equipment for a bit of research.*

Thinking, *Emotions! I am feeling … joy, that my services are once again needed,* made it difficult for the Repository to keep her feelings from coloring her response. *Repositioning in progress, Traynor-Specialist. Stand-by.*

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*SECURE ALLIANCE MILITARY DOCKS · CITADEL*

Three humans—two women and a man—stood near the outer edge of the Dreadnaught docking area, some distance from the current location of the *Normandy*. One woman, wearing a knee-length, dark grey leather duster with a deep hood, stood slightly apart from her companions, Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton and mercenary Zaeed Massani. The woman in dark leather secured her omnitool and turned towards her companions. “Iringù-Eßizkur will touch down here and provide access to her interior. Let’s move back just a bit to give her some room.”

Zaeed didn’t wait for Traynor to repeat herself; he instantly began walking away from the edge of the platform, not wishing to be anywhere close to a Reaper as it landed. Patton followed Massani a bit more slowly, saying, “What about you, Traynor? That thing would crush you as easy as it would either Massani or myself.”

“She’ll home-in on the signal from my omnitool. I have trust that she won’t step on me.”

Patton continued to back away from Traynor, her eyes growing bigger by the second as a massive, Destroyer-class Reaper rapidly approached the edge of the docking platform; spreading its main legs, the ancient construct silently tipped its tail up as it moved over the platform edge. It settled slowly onto the concrete surface, the total silence of its approach broken only by the scraping sound of its claws contacting the hard surface of the platform on which the humans were standing.

One of its legs touched down a few meters away from Samantha Traynor. As the specialist walked towards the clawed ‘foot’ closest to her, Patton placed the tips of her thumb and index finger into her mouth and blew past them, producing a nearly ear-splitting whistle. Motioning to Zaeed, she hollered, “Come on, Massani! Our ride is here!” Turning back to Traynor with a grin, she said somewhat apologetically, “He’s not really keen on doing this, so I told ‘im, ‘If I can go in there, so
can you.’ Still not sure he’s convinced.”

Sammy’s grin was mostly hidden by her cowl. “I understand the feeling, Master Guns. Damned thing gave me the creeps first time I went inside. She says …”

“… she? Sandra interrupted.

“That’s right … this one considers herself to be gender feminine. Only one I’ve ever encountered. Anyway, she admits that the colors and patterns and shapes of every Reaper were designed to terrorize whoever saw them.” As she finished speaking, a boarding tube was lowered to the platform a meter from Traynor’s feet; there was an opening that appeared to be just under a meter wide by two-and-a-half high on one side of the tube, allowing the pair to see light spilling out from within. Saying, “Come on. The tube is a null-gravity area – we can just float right on up into Iringù-Eßizkur’s reception chamber.”

“And then what, Specialist? Wait fer da goddamn thing ter digest us?” Zaeed had joined them and was scrutinizing the boarding tube and the underside of this construct with a worried eye. “Are you sure dis thing ain’t gonna turn us inta some kinda mush?”

Sammy’s answer was to walk through the doorway into the tube, where she slowly disappeared as she drifted up towards the Repository’s main body. “Come on!” she called down. “Sooner we get the info we need, the sooner you two can return to Delta.”

I can assure I will neither digest you nor turn you into mush … of any kind, Massani-Zaeed. The distinctly feminine sounding voice ‘spoke’ with musical undertones.

Massani’s mouth fell as he looked up at the belly of this apparently intelligent machine. “It was listenin’ ter me?”

I am always listening, Massani-Zaeed. Please, enter the boarding tube. You will come to no harm while within my structure.

Zaeed jumped as a hand landed on his left shoulder. “Come on, Massani. I’m right beside you,” Patton whispered in a husky voice.

After staring at Patton for a few moments, Zaeed nodded once; with jaw hard-set in a grimace of resignation, he moved to stand for a moment in front of the opening, before taking the final two steps within. Patton had moved with him, so was surprised when Massani began slowly floating up through this otherworldly elevator. She herself began floating upwards after her companion was a good three to four meters above her. She realized there was insufficient room within this tube for them to safely ascend side-by-side – as Massani had stepped in first, the tube acted on him first.

♦ WITHIN IRING𝑈-Ε SSPIZKUR, AT LARGE ♦

As he came to the top of the boarding tube, the force that had been lifting him gently pushed him out through a similar opening to the one he had entered below. On his feet once more, he turned just in time to witness Patton, the expression on her face a mixture of pleasure and awe, exiting in a similar manner. “You good, Massani?”

“Yeah,” he smirked. “Not a bad way ter be brought on board, I guess … unless it’s ter become Reaper fodder.”

A voice, infinitely ancient and new, with musical tones sounding a minor key, replied to Massani’s
Traynor appeared at a doorway on the far side of the chamber, saying, “Ignore him, Iringù-Ebizzkur. I doubt anything you can say or do will convince Zaeed he’s in less danger within your structure than outside in the Blue Suns controlled sections of Delta Ward” Looking at Massani and Patton, she added as she waved an arm, “Come on in, both of you … make yourselves at home. Iringù-Ebizzkur … would you take us to the area above the Citadel arms, please?”

**As you wish, Specialist.**

As Sandra took the few steps necessary to cross the small ‘reception’ compartment, she felt a sudden, slight touch of vertigo that almost immediately disappeared. She placed a hand over her midriff, prompting an explanation from their transport. **My apologies, Patton-Master Gunnery Sergeant. I have rotated the artificial gravity in the habitat compartments to insure that the direction you perceive as ‘down’ remains in the same location.**

Sandee said without thinking, “It’s just Patton, no title needed,” as she entered the working area formerly used by the Shadow Broker. She gazed about the compartment in wide-eyed amazement at the number of servers, terminals and monitors, all powered up and working. Massani, having stopped close enough behind her to brush her shoulder and arm, let out a low whistle of astonishment.

Traynor was sitting in front of a display that was continuously updating as she entered more data. Looking up, she said, “Zaeed. I need you to watch the monitors immediately behind me … let me know when you see the building or neighborhood you believe to be Solem Dal’Serah’s. Iringù-Ebizzkur is floating equidistant from all five arms so it doesn’t appear she’s favoring one over the other, but every scanner we have at our disposal is focused on Delta Ward in the vicinity of the Blue Suns territory.”

Zaeed moved to stand behind Traynor in order to watch the video monitors; Patton came up beside him and placed her hands on his upper arm as she also inspected the changing scene being displayed. Traynor was methodically scanning the areas where Massani and Patton had been walking in their search for Quinton Yang when Patton spotted a building with a familiar look. “There! That one, Traynor.”

Sammy looked over her shoulder to see which location Patton was pointing to; she quickly paused the movement of the scan and increased the magnification of the building’s roof. “That’s it, Specialist. See the stack of shipping crates? That’s where I fell when that bastard shot me!”

Traynor shifted the perspective to depict a three-dimensional, 45 degree view, prompting Massani to murmur, “Damn … you fell off there?” Shaking his head, he concluded, “Lucky you didn’t get ’urt more seriously … or killed.”

Patton asked Sammy to widen the viewing field so they could inspect a slightly larger area. It was Zaeed that discovered it, in the upper left corner of the screen. “There! That buildin’ is tha one, Specialist. Can you push in there … an’ include tha alley?”

As Traynor moved the view to center the building in her screen and zoom in closer, Zaeed grumbled, “That’s tha one, ain’t it, then? Has ter be. Dal’Serah may or may not be there, but I guaran’ee tha place is crawlin’ wiv Blue Suns.”

Patton studied the surrounding area carefully as Traynor spun the 45 degree view around in order to inspect the entire building. “Only showing one way in and out, Massani … that speaks to Dal’Serah having a bolt-hole that surfaces well away from the building,” she said in a somber voice. “We need
to find that exit before we go in … can’t have that sonovabitch escaping sight unseen.”

Traynor said softly, “Captain Cody granted me a few days liberty, Master Guns. Told me to be armed and armored. He didn’t spell it out, but I’m out here to assist you in any way I can.”

Sandee smiled at Traynor, saying, “You’re a comms tech, Specialist. I sincerely doubt you received the training you’d need to successfully tangle with a bunch of mercenaries.”

Sammy returned Patton’s smile with a smirk. “I can pull my weight, Patton. One of you will need to stop Dal’Serah if and when he uses that bolt-hole. We’re going to find where it emerges, and I expect Mr Massani here will want to greet him when he does. That leaves me to assist you in dealing with a building full of mercs.”

“What’s ter stop me from enterin’ that buildin’ through that bol’-hole Specialist – comin’ up on Dal’Serah from behind, as it were?”

“That’d be a great strategy, but I seriously doubt the door will be operable from outside, Zaeed—or even visible without special equipment—it’ll be latched mechanically from within, so there’ll be no Haptic interface to hack.” Traynor began using the special filters that had allowed the Shadow Broker such unfettered access into every nook and cranny of people’s lives. As she entered instructions, the computer peeled away the solid, purely physical view to reveal the internal structures supporting the building, its ribs and floor supports, internal structures forming interior walls, along with the numerous ventilation and elevator shafts, public stairwells, and—of special interest to Massani and Patton—the numerous hidden pathways and staircases reserved for emergency use by members of the upper echelon.

As Traynor drilled down into the building’s sub-levels, she discovered what could only be the luxury suite that would most certainly be occupied by Solem Dal’Serah, along with a small elevator shaft that could only be entered from a ‘safe-room’, an impregnable mini-fortress that would be Dal’Serah’s last line of defense against an all-out assault.

“That miserable four-eyed sonovabitch,” Massani growled. “No fuckin’ way ter get ter ’im once ’e’s in there!”

Traynor spun about in her chair and stood to look at Massani. “There’s no way to prevent him from getting in that room, Zaeed, and once he’s there, he’ll disappear … unless …” she paused as she shifted her attention to Patton. “One of us will have to tag him with a tracker, or be prepared to follow him to wherever his personal ship is stashed.”

“Why not just wait outside that door an’ kill ‘im when ‘e comes out?” Zaeed wanted to know.

“Simple,” Traynor replied. “Unless he leaves a location for Vido Santiago on a datapad somewhere, we won’t be any closer to cutting off the head of the snake than we are right now. I’d be willing to bet Dal’Serah will high-tail it to wherever Santiago is currently hiding. All we need to do is stand ready to follow him, then nail both of them together.”

Returning to her chair, Traynor continued to manipulate the image of the neighborhood around the building until she found the exit tunnel. She highlighted the path from its beginning on sub-level one to its terminus in the storeroom at the back of a nearby weapons and armor dealer. “So, he rides his personal elevator up from sub-level three,” she said as she electronically overlaid a bright orange line on the path out of the building, “gets out on sub-level one on the opposite side of the shaft from the entry point, runs three blocks along this tunnel, then climbs a short ladder and exits through the trapdoor in this arms shop.”
Bringing the surrounding neighborhood into high-resolution focus, she searched for several moments before drawing a graphic circle around an object that looked like a shadow. “Aircar,” she intoned. “Less than half-a-klick from the arms merchant … probably there for just one thing.”

“Escape to the civilian ship yard,” Patton muttered. “We need to identify which ship he’ll leave on, Traynor.”

“May not be possible ahead of time, Sandee.” Traynor mused, partially to herself. “Most likely scenario will involve him booking passage on whatever freighter is ready for departure, then transferring to another ship at a waypoint, such as Omega Station.”

“Ya don’t think ’e’ll go into da ’Verse?” asked Zaeed.

Sammy shook her head as she replied, “Scumbags like Dal’Serah and Santiago need someplace as far off the main travel lanes and transit points as possible. My gut says he’ll go to ground deep in the Terminus … the Shrike Abyssal, maybe … or the Vallhallan Threshold.” As she continued to enter data, she added, “I’ll do some more research, see what shakes loose outta Raheel-Leyya and Xe Cha … Might get lucky. Meantime, here’s the building maps.” Traynor sent the skeletal view of Dal’Serah’s building to their omnitools. “Study the maps, memorize as much as you can. It’ll be kind of difficult to pull those up with Blue Suns trying to kill you from every corner.”
A Costly Assault

A mess of beautiful contradictions make her whole, she wears fire for skin but a storm lives in her soul — Nikita Gill

Húdié dāo – [蝴蝶刀 – butterfly sword (knife in English)]

Oscar-Mike – Military phonetic alphabet letters O and M … translates to “On the Move.”

♦ DELTA WARD · CITADEL ♦

Alliance Specialist Samantha Traynor had gathered as much information as was available concerning Solem Dal’Serah, the batarian responsible for day-to-day operations of the Blue Suns, not only on the Citadel, but also within Earth Alliance space and the Attican Traverse; Dal’Serah only answered —grudgingly, it seemed—to Suns ‘founder’ Vido Santiago, who had not been seen publicly in a number of months.

Gossip and rumor was abundant concerning Vido’s whereabouts, with many affirming to have actually seen him dead, only to be disproved—embarrassingly so, in most cases—by his appearance in an expensive restaurant or bar or whore-house within one of the many outlaw run systems in the Terminus.

Traynor’s research placed Dal’Serah in a fortress-like building within one of the poorer neighborhoods in the Citadel’s Delta Ward. The approach was guarded by numerous cameras and motion detectors, such that simply walking up to the main entry was impossible to do clandestinely. Traynor and Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton had deployed from Iringù-Eßizkur, the Repository outfitted with all of the equipment that had been used by Liara T’Soni in her role as the Shadow Broker; they were now standing on either side of the moderately wide alleyway leading to the Blue Suns rather imposing headquarters building.

Traynor had equipped herself and Patton with highly modified cloaking generators – a normal cloak would still leave the user vulnerable to detection by a batarian, whose upper eyes were sensitive to light in the infrared bands. Traynor’s modified cloaking generators masked those emissions significantly better than previous models were capable of doing. Additionally, Traynor was wearing her Mass-reduction generator.

Patton had expressed a great deal of surprise at the armor, weapons and equipment Traynor possessed; Sammy had tried to explain about the Ø7 program without violating the non-disclosure agreement forced upon her when the program had terminated, primarily at the insistence of an admiral beholden to Cerberus. Traynor had asked Patton to simply take it on faith that she was capable of far more than holding her own against any batarians they may came across.

Iringù-Eßizkur had used her nightmarish looking hovercycle to transport Zaeed Massani to Dal’Serah’s getaway aircar Traynor had pinpointed; it was still parked half-a-klick from the weapons and armor dealer that was the location for an exit tunnel from Dal’Serah’s saferoom inside his headquarters. With his cloaking generator activated, Massani had secured a pair of trackers to the aircar – he was hoping that, if one was discovered and removed, the other would remain on the car and continue to leave a trail. Trackers planted, Massani walked to the arms and armor shop, where he nosed around in an effort to find the best vantage points for following the batarian once he’d started running.
As Zaeed was inspecting the batarian’s probable escape path, Traynor used her omnitool to hack into the control unit for the cameras and motion detectors; as she had once done on Cartagena Station, she set the cameras to standby after having the control unit ‘loop’ already recorded footage on an eighteen-minute playback cycle. Anyone viewing the video from any of the cameras would see an alley devoid of movement, and the now inactive motion detectors were as useless as the cameras.

Closing her omnitool, she whispered, “Come on, Patton … let’s get inside.” In the same breath, she hissed, “Massani! We’re Oscar-Mike.”

She heard a gruff “Gotcha,” in her suit comms as she trotted through the alley to the door. She felt Patton come up behind her and place a hand on her shoulder. “Kinda hard to stay with you, Traynor. Damned if your cloak isn’t really effective.”

Sammy ignored the comment as she activated her omnitool once again – this time to hack into the electronic lock guarding the main door. Thinking, *I’ll just bet this fucker has an alarm and a flashbang attached to it*, she carefully probed the circuits guarding the electronic unit. The lock was actually quite sophisticated, particularly for a building in this part of the wards – there was an alarm, along with a pair of flashbangs set to detonate at the slightest indication that anyone was tinkering with the haptic interface. Unfortunately for the Blue Suns, Specialist Traynor wasn’t just anyone. In less than 90 seconds, she disabled the lock, causing the interface to turn amber, then green.

Waving her omnitool through the interface released the door latches; Sammy pushed the door slightly, causing an increasing gap along one vertical edge. *Old-fashioned hinged door*, she thought. Pulling her húdié dāo from their sheaths, she said, “Weapons hot, Sandee. We’re going in.”

Patton, her comms microphone set to ‘active’, whispered, “Ready,” as she pulled her N7 Crusader and set it’s ammo enhancement to incendiary. Both women went in low and quiet; reaching the end of a short passage, Patton quietly expressed surprise that no one was in this part of the building. “Nothing for them to watch in here – elevator doors are pass locked, so only those with the correct code can open them,” she whispered.

After sheathing her knives, Traynor activated her omnitool once more. Probing the circuitry for this lock, she was slightly surprised there was only a six-character code employed in the electronic mechanism. Before entering the code to open the doors, she looked through the programming a bit more and discovered a different code closed the doors, with a different code being used for each of the six levels the elevator could access.

Saying, “Okay, Patton … here we go,” she entered the code to open the doors, moved into the car and crouched in one corner. When Patton had mirrored her move, Sammy added, “Doors at the back will open onto Dal’Serah’s private abode.” She entered the code for sub-level three; the entry doors silently closed and the car started down. Traynor closed her omnitool, set the device for combat, then drew her húdié dāo once again. Whispering, “End of the hallway, through the doors into a small lobby. Probably some batarian enforcers there. Dal’Serah will be behind a locked door at the back.”

As the elevator slowly eased to a halt, the doors opened onto a dimly lit hallway. The four batarians standing on either side of the door at the far end looked at the arriving elevator with a bit of curiosity, enough so that two of them started walking towards it. Traynor—still cloaked—leaped into action, running to meet the curious guards; a shoulder in the gut of the one on the right knocked him to the floor with a heavy >THUD< while a razor-sharp blade across his throat stopped him from giving voice to any protest he may have uttered.
His partner immediately began firing his pistol indiscriminately around the body of his downed partner – a lucky shot went through Traynor’s kinetic barrier, hitting and damaging her cloaking generator. Now completely visible, the specialist leaped at the merc, burying a knife in his unprotected side as she shoved her other blade up through the underside of his jaw, severing his trachea and brainstem. Viciously pulling the blade sideways in order to extract it nearly decapitated him.

Patton had run past the specialist while she took care of the first pair of guards; the second pair of guards were just bringing their guns to bear on a very visible Samantha Traynor as Patton used her Crusader—held crossways with one hand on the barrel, the other on the shoulder stock—to hit the nearest merc hard across the nose and mouth. Releasing the gun’s muzzle, she used her newly freed left hand to grab the back of his head and pull him down to smash his now bloody face into her upraised knee, dropping him in an unconscious heap on the floor. His partner fired several rounds at a shadow, pinging Patton’s shield and armor as she rolled away; once again on her knees in a crouch, she dropped him with a slug from the shotgun.

Traynor grabbed the gun from one of her victims and ran back to the elevator, there to jam it into the gap between the open door and the car itself. With a whispered, “That ought to keep reinforcements from coming down from the other levels,” she hurried back to the other end of the hall, rejoining Patton beside the final door.

Sandra took a quick look at her and observed, “You’re bleeding, Specialist.” Pulling a tube of medigel from a utility pocket on her thigh, she jabbed its nozzle in the small tear in her under armor shirt, just at the edge of her backplate, and squeezed the contents into the wound. “Must have nicked you when he hit your cloaking generator.”

Traynor took a deep breath as she looked at Patton. “Thanks. Weapon ready?”

Patton hefted her shotgun as she said, “Let’s do this … Massani … are you set?”

A gravelly “Standing by …” came over their comms as Patton stood and moved in front of the door, which detected her presence and opened. There were a number of batarians in Blue Suns armor, some standing around, some sitting, all in a nicely appointed waiting room; Patton started firing her Crusader as she crossed the threshold and moved to the left, the powerful gun sounding like a cannon in the confined space. After firing four shots, she rolled to the left, jacked the heat sink and took a kneeling stance to fire again.

While Patton’s victims were falling to the floor, a fully visible Traynor moved to the right; several of those near the back of the rather large space instantly began moving towards her as they pulled pistols and shotguns of their own. Traynor grabbed one of the last mercs hit by a round from Patton’s gun; holding onto the collar of the dying batarian’s jumpsuit with one hand, she shoved him at the Blue Sun coming towards her, then followed up with a running leap, kicking the second merc in the head as he tried to clear himself from his dying comrade.

With both mercs down, the specialist dropped into a forward roll, dodging the stream of bullets from the muzzle of a beat-up looking M-12 Locust. When the merc attempted to replace the used heat sink, she came up underneath the weapon and his arms with an omniblade, effortlessly shoving the hot ceramic up into his chest, thus slicing his diaphragm and heart as she broke the blade off at its pivot point. Taking a quick look around confirmed there were no other mercs close enough for her to make use of her blades, so she tucked into a roll and quickly scuttled back to the left.

Patton was now using her Crusader for across-the-room kills, utilizing the shotgun’s deadly accuracy to make three headshots in a row. Firing the last round at a merc coming at her from the right, her shot went wide as the batarian managed to get his left hand on the end of the barrel and shove the
muzzle aside; his fist connected with her cheekbone before she could react. He quickly pulled a knife from his belt and attempted to shove it into her armor-plated chest; before he could try again, his back arched and his body spasmed from the impact of an intense, purple-colored ceramic blade, the tip just erupting from the middle of his chest. He only had time to look down in amazement at what he was seeing before his nervous system informed his brain he was dead; he dropped in a heap from the damage caused by Traynor’s omni-blade, flash-forged and shoved through his spine, heart, sternum and front plate before her fist connected with his backplate.

With just a brief look of amazed gratitude, Sandra looked around quickly to make sure there was no more opposition still standing while Sammy hurriedly checked the bodies; after ensuring each was dead—two needed kill shots between the eyes—she took their weapons and stacked them in a pile near the only locked door in the room.

Crouching behind the doorframe, Traynor grabbed a tube of medigel from her own stash and gently applied some to Patton’s already swollen cheek and temple. “Looks like he really clocked you, Master Guns. You’re gonna have a helluva bruise there.”

Sandra endured Sammy’s ministrations, then rose to stand guard behind her, Crusader pointed at the center of the hatch as the specialist once again employed her omnitool, this time to explore the intricacies of the haptic lock guarding this final door.

Murmuring, “Gotcha,” she motioned to Patton, indicating she should stand behind Traynor’s position beside the door opening’s bulkhead; entering the code, she quickly reset the omnitool for combat as the segments split and retracted into the wall. When the master gunnery sergeant rose and started to go in, Sammy stuck her arm out to block her, whispering, “Hold up, Sandee!”

“You fucking human bitches! You think you’re gonna get outta here alive?” The sound of an automatic assault rifle, its bullets spraying through the open door literally centimeters from Traynor’s nose, was accompanied by derisive laughter. “You’re going to die, and my boss is gonna take a shit on your stinkin’ bodies!”

Picking up one of the assault rifles behind her, she threw it high and hard into the room; this was instantly answered by rounds from the automatic weapon. As the unknown merc was shooting at the distraction, Traynor quickly leaned in to aim her fist at the batarian’s weapon; using her omnitool, she blasted the merc and the gun with a powerful electronic overload; this instantly ‘friened’ the mass accelerator controlling the weapon’s ammunition supply, causing destructive arcing in the weapon’s internal circuitry.

The shocked batarian instantly dropped his overheated weapon and was in the process of bringing up a heavy pistol when a slug from Patton’s Crusader entered his chest. Krin’lo Pakbagoh looked down at this newest uniform decoration before looking into Patton’s eyes; he slowly tilted his head to the right, grunted out, “Fuckin’ bitch,” and collapsed to the floor, where he lay gasping for air while the blood spilling from the massive entry hole in his chest and exit hole in his back slowly spread in an ever widening pool beneath him, until his brain accepted the inevitable and ceased to care … about anything.

Shouting, “Hey Dal’Serah! Ya missed! And we’re coming for ya!” Sammy rose slightly from her crouch and cautiously followed Sandra into Dal’Serah’s private retreat. As the specialist looked about, Patton spoke into her comms. “Zaeed! We took out Krin’lo Pakbagoh, but there’s no trace of Dal’Serah in here … better look for him to pop out of that weapons shop.”

Massani replied, “Thas good news ’bout Pakbagoh, but no sign ov Solem yet, Luv. Do ya think ’e was even in there?”
“Pakbagoh was attempting to keep us out of this office; his only reason for being here was to slow down or stop any pursuit of his boss.”

“… Shit!  Standby ... I got movement!” he interrupted. After several moments of silence, Zaeed added, “Got ’im, Luv. Following ’im ter the aircar. Once ’e’s there, what then?”

Traynor came on, saying, “Get to Iringù-Eßizkur’s hover-bike, Zaeed!” Then, to the Repository, “Iringù-Eßizkur, lock on to the tracers on that aircar and follow it with your transport … be careful!”

Iringù-Eßizkur replied immediately so all three of them could hear: »As you wish, Traynor. Massani, I will shadow the aircar discretely when you are ready.«

Patton, nosing around while Traynor was speaking with Iringù-Eßizkur, moved around behind the opulent desk and chair so recently vacated by Dal’Serah. Using her omnitool, she nervously scanned the desk and chair, expecting to find some kind of trap or fail-safe device to prevent intruders such as themselves from accessing any sensitive data or secrets the Blue Suns wished to keep from becoming public knowledge. Her caution was justified, as she detected a substantial amount of high explosive in the desk. Looking at the readings again caused the hair on the back of neck to stand at attention. “Traynor! You better get over here.”

Sammy asked, “What’s up?” as she moved to stand beside Patton.

“Not sure. Looks like this desk is hiding some serious explosives … is that possible?”

Traynor activated her own omnitool; after scanning the desk, she said, “Dammit! We need to leave … now!” Closing her tool as she turned to leave, she hollered, “Run, Patton!” while sprinting back towards the entrance. The master gunnery sergeant was hot on Traynor’s heels as they cleared the door and raced back through the large waiting room towards the far exit. They had just cleared that door when it happened – an explosion seemingly all out of proportion to the size of the desk completely blew out the wall between Dal’Serah’s office and the large waiting room; the super-heated pressure wave hurled both women bodily down the length of the hall, where they crashed unceremoniously into the elevator car, its doors still jammed open by the assault rifle Traynor had utilized.

Zaaed Massani was astride the evil-looking hover-cycle being flown and controlled by Iringù-Eßizkur, which she was using to discretely follow Solem Dal’Serah as he flew an aircar towards the commercial docks in an attempt to escape from the Alliance soldiers that had invaded his domain in the slums of Delta Ward. Massani was actually beginning to enjoy this mode of transport, although he still hadn’t come to grips with it being completely under the control of a damned bloody Reaper.

He had been monitoring Patton’s and Traynor’s progress, up until he had spotted Dal’Serah furtively coming out of the small weapons and armor shop that provided the terminus for his blocks-long escape route. As soon as he had resealed his enviro-suit against the lack of atmosphere and grabbed both handholds, Iringù-Eßizkur had lifted the machine from the alley and followed along well above and behind Dal’Serah’s aircar.

The last words he had heard over his comms came from Traynor, followed by the unmistakable sound of an immense explosion; that sound had cut out with an electronic crackle mid-transmission. Massani’s multiple attempts to raise either Patton or Traynor over his suit-comms was repeatedly met with a deafening silence, causing the old merc to grow increasingly worried about them, Patton in particular … he had met few women like the master gunnery sergeant during his long career … she had taken an instant dislike to him that he had seen turn into grudging respect. He still barely knew her, but … having held her close several nights ago … having watched her unabashedly change
clothes in front of him … had awakened feelings he had thought long buried.

Deciding he needed some backup, he changed the frequency of his suit-comms and called the *Normandy*.

Sandra Patton gradually became aware of her surroundings—there was a great deal of dust—particles of what she suspected was insulation … and smoke. It absolutely hurt to breathe, and she didn’t think *that* was due to the polluted air. Attempting to move caused her to cry out as intense pain radiated from her lower legs. She was obviously injured, but how … she tried to look around, to see where the hell she was, but there was not enough available light for her to make out her surroundings.

She was having difficulty thinking. She was aware she was lying, at least partially, on another person … on … Samantha Traynor. *Damn it all to hell!* She attempted to move again, using her lower arms this time … even this hurt, but not as bad as her legs. By concentrating, she was finally able to shift her weight slightly to the side, discovering as she did so that she had been lying across the backs of Sammy’s thighs. As she laboriously dragged herself sideways, intense pain in her lower legs once again caused her to cry out. Attempting to roll up onto her side also caused pain, though not as much. Keeping her legs as still as possible, she used every last bit of her remaining strength to slide her torso off of Traynor’s legs.

“Specialist Traynor. Sammy!” That was odd … her voice sounded strange, as if she was speaking into a comms system, hearing only her voice in her head and not in the air around her. “Traynor!” As loud as she could manage … virtually a shout, but she could only ‘hear’ the sound in her head. She waited several moments. She was beginning to think … *No! No Way! That cannot be!* “Traynor!” A virtual scream. *What the fuck? She cannot be … dead. No!*

Thinking that Traynor might be lying in here with her … dead … *Sonovabitch, Sandee! Keep it together!* … Not knowing if the specialist was speaking and Patton simply couldn’t hear her over the rushing sound of … water… air … in her head, she reached for, grabbed and shook the calf of one of Sam’s legs. “Patton?” she croaked again.

“Patton? Zat’chu?” The specialist was groggy. Her nose felt stuffy and she couldn’t hear anything other than a rushing noise, seemingly in her head … certainly not Patton, or anything else. *What the fuck? Bloody nose? How in hell?* … She attempted to rise from her position, prone on her chest on the floor, but quickly discovered both her arms, folded under her chest and belly, were non-responsive, no matter how much willpower she used in the attempt. Fighting down the rising panic that was threatening to consume her, she said, “Patton! Can’t move my arms. Can’t … goddammit, I can’t move, Sandra. I can’t …”

Patton grabbed her calf again, shook it. “Can you feel this, Sammy? I’ve got your leg. Can you feel my hand on your leg?”

Traynor could feel … something, but she couldn’t hear anything. She attempted to draw her leg up by moving her knees, first one, then the other. *Damn. That hurts worse’n ’ell!* Ignoring the pain in her back and thighs, she managed to slowly bring her knees up under her hips. With her butt up in the air, she thought, *So, I’m not paralyzed … that’s something, anyway. Now, what the fuck’s wrong with my arms?*

As she thought about her arms, she began feeling an intense tingling in her hands, painful to the point of drawing tears. *Shit!* She could see … absolutely nothing … but sensed that Patton was beside her in the pitch-black darkness. “Patton,” she croaked. “Your head? Down by my feet?” Traynor’s mind was gradually regaining its focus, trying to think of a way to get them out of this mess.
Even though Patton could hear nothing Sammy said, she did have enough presence of mind to reach for and grab a boot. “My right hand, Sammy … on your right boot,” she gasped. Sliding her hand slowly upwards from Traynor’s ankle, she finally reached the side of Sammy’s knee … could feel the woven fabric of her under-armor mesh. She tapped the unarmored fabric, saying, “Can you feel that?”

Sammy nearly cried with joy – she could feel Patton’s fingers on the side of her leg … painfully so. “Okay, Sandee. Can you reach your omnitool, maybe activate a light?” Traynor pushed her left knee down as she pushed with her right leg and foot, forcing her body to fall to the side, away from her partner. Fortunately, her butt hit the entry doors at the back of the car, allowing her to slowly slide down the slick metal until she was lying on her side with her arms in front of her. She nearly jumped out of her skin when a light, intensely bright in the total darkness, suddenly appeared by her feet. Bless her, Patton had activated the small light on her omnitool.

Pointing the beam straight up, she looked around as her eyes adjusted. Spotting Traynor looking at her, she said, “My god, Sammy! Your face is all bloody … blood coming from your ear as well.”

Traynor’s expression took on a puzzled look, before she replied … or tried to. “You look like bloody fuckin’ ’ell, Sandra … I’m guessing we both have concussions.”

It was Patton’s turn to look puzzled. She could see Sammy’s mouth moving, but nothing was coming out … or … Shit! Eardrums must be ruptured … both of us! She brought her wrists up to her face; dimming the small light, she activated her omnitool’s text editor and laboriously entered, »Can’t hear! Legs! Hurt like hell if I try ’n move ’em. Can u look?« Pressing send, she could see the deep purple/ultraviolet glow of Traynor’s tool as it received the short message.

By now, Traynor’s hands had recovered most of the feeling; once she read the message, she was able to activate the light on her own omnitool, which she trained on Patton’s legs. After sending, »See nothing obvious, Sandee,« she carefully reached her other hand out to gently slide her palm down the back of Patton’s right thigh. She had nearly reached her knee when Patton flinched and gasped in pain, causing Sam to gently pull her hand out from under the leg. Typing back, »Think both ur knees r injured, Sandee,« using contractions in order to minimize her text entry.

»U think Zaeed’s coming for us?« Patton was feeling increasingly nauseous, a condition she suspected was a result of her head trauma coupled with the damage to her ears. She deactivated her omnitool’s light, then attempted to use her arm for a pillow; Damn! That really hurts! Her entire arm was aching, particularly at her shoulder and elbow, so she simply gave up and eased her head down to the floor. Gotta sleep, she thought.

Specialist Traynor noticed the light being extinguished, but couldn’t think of any way to tell Patton to stay awake; she was feeling really woozy herself … needed to rest. Pulling up her omnitool, she laboriously entered a message to Zaeed with a copy to the Normandy, outlining what had happened, where they were and that they urgently needed help. When she finished, she set the tool to resend the message every fifteen minutes, folded her arm under her head and drifted off, hoping she and Patton would be found and extricated before they succumbed to their many injuries.

♦ DECK THREE · SSV NORMANDY ♦

Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez walked purposefully into the Normandy’s Med bay and said, “Doctor Chakwas, grab your field kit … we have a couple of crewmen to rescue.”

Karin looked up from her terminal, apprehension plain in her expression. “What’s happened, Steve?
Which crewmen?"

“Some kind of explosion in a Blue Suns controlled section of Delta Ward. Captain’s having me take a squad down there. Specialist Traynor and Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton are both injured … and trapped in an elevator three levels down. There’s a distinct possibility the building is not secure. No time to explain it all … we have to move. I have a shuttle standing by.”

Karin had left her chair while Cortez was speaking; she grabbed her field kit and exchanged her lab coat for a heavy vest. Declaring herself ready, she followed Cortez to the Normandy’s hanger deck; an idling UT-47a was just outside the lowered ramp, side hatches open and waiting for the last arrivals. Karin entered ahead of Steve and took a seat beside a Marine she had seen on board but did not know personally – one of a contingent transferred onto the ship after Cody became the ship’s captain.

Steve poked his head around the forward partition and said, “Lieutenant Morse, you have the coordinates … let’s go.” Sherri Morse remotely closed the entry hatches, teased the eezo core to life and eased the ungainly craft from the deck beside the ship’s ramp. Bringing the shuttle around, she accelerated up and away from the docks on a course for Delta Ward. Steve had taken the only other available seat and looked at the deck between his feet, apparently lost in thought.

♦

CITADEL · AT LARGE ♦

Nodding to the Sergeant, Cortez said, “Bates, we’re going in a bit blind. We have the building schematic Traynor sent us with her S-O-S, but it’s anyone’s guess as to how many batarians … whether Blue Suns or not, we’ll encounter.” He looked at the schematic on his own omnitool as he continued, “The specialist is injured, severely, to judge by her message, as is Master Guns Patton. Extricating them is going to be tough without a working elevator. Traynor also indicated the front entrance will need to be blown if the code she sent me doesn’t unlock the damned door.”

Sergeant Bates was a recent addition to the Normandy, and had worked with Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton when they had searched Lazarus Station; he found the easy camaraderie aboard the Normandy a pleasant surprise, and considered Patton to be a sister-in-arms. He had very quickly discovered that everyone on the frigate considered everyone else to be family. “We’ll get them out of there, Sir. Not gonna leave Patton and Traynor to die at the hands of a bunch of four-eyed bastards.”

Steve smiled at that. “Good to hear, Sergeant. Just make sure you and your squad stay safe as well. Traynor and Patton went in covertly to flush out a Blue Suns kingpin. I don’t mind telling you I really don’t like the feeling I’m getting in my gut. Any Blue Suns we encounter along the way are to be terminated … with extreme prejudice.”

Bates returned Steve’s smile with one of his own. “Never figured any differently, Sir. We’ll take care of ’em, and get our people out of there.”

♦ DELTA WARD · CITADEL ♦

Sherri Morse brought the shuttle in over the building that served as the Blue Suns headquarters on the Citadel; there was smoke drifting out and away from several of the roof vents of the featureless black tower. “Looks like the right place, Commander. You want to go in through the roof or ground level?”

Steve had studied Traynor’s schematic and decided against a rooftop entry; he needed to get those
women out of the sub-basement and into a hospital. “Set us down outside the alley, Lieutenant. We’ll take the shortest available way into the place.”

Morse replied, “Aye, Sir,” as she eased the shuttle down between the buildings into the narrow space at the outer end of the alley leading in to the entrance. Morse had placed the shuttle’s nose towards the building and left enough clearance for the Marines to get by and into the alley. As Steve and Karin followed, Sherri said on comms, “I’ll be ready to dust off as soon as Traynor and Patton are brought up, Commander. Let me know they’re coming so I can reposition 90 degrees.”

“You got it, Lieutenant,” came the reply. He and Karin trotted along behind the six-man squad until coming to the door where Patton’s and Traynor’s adventure had started. Standing as far to the side as possible, Steve nodded at Sergeant Bates as he entered the code Traynor had sent him; he could only hope it was the correct one, as blowing a hole in the door would take time he didn’t feel those women had. He entered the last part of the code, then waved his arm through the now green haptic interface. The Marines were in a combat crouch, weapons hot, when the door sections retracted.

There were no lights in the hallway stretched out before them; surprisingly, there was no one within to greet them, but there was a trace of smoke drifting out of the elevator threshold at the far end of a hallway. As Bates and his men moved into the hall, Steve and Karin followed behind, coming to a stop at the elevator doors. Once again, Cortez pulled up and entered a code to open the doors. The instant the doors began opening, smoke came wafting in from the shaft below.

Sergeant Bates activated the light in his omnitool, shined it up the shaft for a quick look before drawing back, then repeated for a look down. “Three sets of doors up, two down,” he reported. “Looks as if the top of the car is below the second set of doors. Not a sound in this building, Commander. Kinda spooky …”

Steve thought for a moment. “There were probably not many people here at any one time, Sergeant. I expect the top floors had accountants – they would have had their own escape route. Lower sections were for soldiers, and they would probably all be gone by now as well… at least, the ones not killed by Traynor and Patton.” After a pause, Cortez directed Bates and his squad to return to the shuttle for the equipment needed to rig a hoist, along with bringing a pair of hover litters. Looking at the side walls of the elevator shaft, he spotted a service ladder running down one wall. “I’m going down to that car, see if they’re inside.”

Samantha Traynor had been blissfully unconscious for most of the time since she had sent a message to the Normandy requesting help for herself and Sandra Patton; the exploding bomb in Solem Dal’Serah’s desk had left the pair with numerous injuries, some quite severe. A vibration in the floor on which she was lying roused her slightly. She was still unable to hear anything except the rushing sound within her own head. She opened her eyes and moved her head slightly; as she did, the appearance of a painfully brilliant shaft of light forced her to close them tight.

Steve crouched at the edge of the emergency hatch he had opened and looked in; forcing the dread he was feeling to the back of his mind, he shined his light on Patton, then on Traynor. The pair were lying head to foot across the width of the car, and he thought he saw Traynor move her head slightly. Shouting back up the shaft, he said, “Karin! Traynor’s alive.” He looked at Patton again, studying her for the slightest movement … Nothing, dammit! Leaning over, he grasped the edges of the opening, swung his legs into the car and carefully dropped down to land between them.

“Traynor,” he said, sounding loud even to himself; no response. Damn! Bloody nose, some dried blood at her ear. Going to his knees between them, he carefully placed his hand at the small of Sammy’s back as he leaned down to look at her eyes. Come on, Specialist. Open ’em up, he thought as he cupped her cheek with his right hand.
The touch must have got through, as she cracked her eyelids open just enough for him to see and whispered, “K’mandr?” Steve Cortez seldom got emotional, but hearing Sammy attempt to say his title nearly pushed him to the brink. “We’re going to get you some help, Specialist, understand?” he choked out. “We’ll get you out of here, get you to a hospital.” On his comms, he said, “Sergeant Bates! SITREP!”

“Rigging the hoist now, Sir. Be ready shortly.”

Steve didn’t question what ‘shortly’ meant – he knew Bates and his men were working as fast as they possibly could. Letting go of Sammy, he directed his light down the hallway long enough to be sure there was no movement there before turning towards Patton; unlike Traynor, she was lying on her stomach rather than on her side. She also had dried blood in and around her ear and … as he leaned down to look at her face, he saw that she, too, had a bloody nose. Careless placement of a hand on the back of her legs caused an involuntary gasp of pain, making him jump.

Placing a hand on her cheek as he had done with Traynor, he leaned down far enough to look into her eyes, had they been open. “Patton … Sandra! Come on, Master Guns, wake up.” Her only reply was a low moan, but it was enough. Hearing a sound on the roof of the car, he looked up to see Corporal Marianne Payne looking down through the escape hatch.

“We have the hoist all set, Commander, and I brought down a pair of litters,” she loudly said.

“Okay, Corporal,” Steve replied. “Let’s have the litters down here. I need Doctor Chakwas in here with me … we’ll have to strap them into the litters in order to get them out of this car.”

“Stand by, Sir. I’m going to lower a ladder … make it easier for the doctor.” Steve carefully stood up to catch the ladder legs as the corporal handed it down; she followed that with the first litter, then the second. Steve set the ladder so Karin could get down from atop the car, then called up through the hatch. “Doctor Chakwas? Bring your kit and come on down.”

Karin carefully swung her legs over; when she was sure of her footing, she eased herself down the ladder. Once standing on a somewhat solid surface, she quickly went to work, using her omnitool to first scan Sandra from head-to-toe, then Samantha. Looking at the results had her grim-faced. “Okay, Steve, Patton first. Help me …” Setting the narrow litter between the women, she had Cortez crouch at Patton’s feet.

“I need you to keep her legs and hips in as straight a line as you can … we don’t have time to splint them. She has torn ligaments in both knees and her tibias … shinbones … are fractured. She has a mild concussion, ruptured eardrums and possible middle ear damage. There’s more, but you get the idea – this young lady is severely injured, and I need her in Huerta Memorial just as soon as possible.”

Steve had been listening as he straddled Patton’s legs and the far edge of the litter; Karin grasped the master gunnery sergeant’s shoulders while Cortez bent over to grasp Patton’s left hip and leg. On a signal from Karin, he lifted and rolled her legs as carefully as he could; her unconscious cries of pain nearly ripped his heart out, but she was now lying on her back. He assisted Karin in buckling her in to keep her immobile during her ride up the elevator shaft. After activating the tiny ME generator in the frame, he stood the litter up far enough that it could be pulled through the escape hatch and lifted up the shaft.

Looking up, Cortez said, “Corporal Payne. Get Sandra up to the surface and loaded in the shuttle. I’ll contact Lieutenant Morse, have her deliver Patton to the hospital as soon as she’s aboard. We’re going to need another shuttle.”
As he assisted Karin in securing Traynor in the second litter—a task made easier now that Sandra was on her way up the shaft—he spoke to Morse on comms and explained what was needed; she in turn contacted the Normandy and requested a second shuttle. As soon as the Marines had Sandra loaded in the shuttle, Lieutenant Morse lifted off and began her mad dash to Huerta Memorial, saying “Oscar-Mike, Commander” as she left.

Karin’s expression was grim. “Commander, I sure hope this operation was worth it, because Patton’s life is literally hanging by a thread, and the outlook for Traynor appears nearly as bleak.”

Cortez shook his head, saying, “I can guarantee that their lives are worth more to Captain Cody than having the Blue Suns broken. I also know that if Patton dies, there’ll be no stopping Zaeed Massani – he will willingly walk into hell if that’s what it takes to kill Solem Dal’Serah and Vido Santiago.” Looking up, he called out, “Corporal? Let’s get Ms Traynor out of here.”

“You got it, Sir.”

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SECURE ALLIANCE WING, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL · CITADEL

Captain William Cody stood silently, contemplating the results of his campaign against the Blue Suns; from where he stood between the med beds, he listened to the low volume sounds coming from the life-signs monitors for the women lying broken and silent under the white sheets and blankets drawn up to their necks. Of the two, Sandra Patton had been more severely injured by the bomb blast in Solem Dal’Serah’s office, but Samantha Traynor wasn’t out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, either. Both women had sustained concussions; their eardrums had been ruptured, with some middle ear damage; they each had some degree of pulmonary barotrauma, or blast lung, and some abdominal hemorrhaging. Patton had torn ligaments in both knees and fractured shin bones, along with a dislocated shoulder, while Traynor had a fractured pelvis, several fractured ribs, a ruptured spleen, and metal fragments in both eyes. After listing all that, the inclusion of a bullet wound in her back seemed relatively minor.

Cody needed to contact Captain Yuán aboard the Hong Kong, which was still in the Horse Head Nebula following up on investigations into the stations abandoned by Cerberus during and after the Reaper war. Bill knew Xiùlán would be upset; the longer he put off making the call, the more difficult it was going to be for him to tell her that Sammy’s condition was critical.

He nearly reached out to touch each woman’s shoulder, but restrained himself – there were multiple tubes and wires going in and coming out of both of them in every place imaginable, and Patton had a dislocated shoulder. Heaving a heavy sigh, he turned to leave. Doctor Chakwas had solemnly told him that either … or both … of these women—women that had trusted him as their captain to keep them safe—could quite possibly die.

Cody had started the campaign to rid the galaxy of the Blue Suns with his eyes wide-open, knowing that the people he sent on missions might not return uninjured … might even be killed, a fact he was keenly aware of after seeing Patton and Traynor lying comatose in their beds. If one … or both … died as a result, he would accept the casualties as a regrettably costly result and move on. It was, by far, the most unpleasant and oft times difficult aspect of his job, but he couldn’t allow the actual or potential personnel losses to distract him from the ultimate goal … He could only hope both Traynor and Patton would pull through and no one else would suffer at the hands of the Blue Suns before they managed to complete the task in front of him.

Captain Bill Cody sighed again as he slowly left the ICU and headed back to the Normandy.
A/N: One thing I did not explain as Traynor and Patton made their mad dash out of Dal’Serah’s office concerns Sammy’s ability to disarm the desk-bomb; her scan of the desk showed there simply wasn’t sufficient time for her to hack the circuit and turn the timer off before detonation. Good as she is, she’s also smart enough to know when to cut and run.
Captain Bill Cody placed his hands on the control rail and leaned heavily on it, arms straight, elbows locked. He had sent a request to speak with Captain Yuán Xiùlán on the Hong Kong II, still in the Horse Head Nebula exploring the various stations Cerberus had abandoned, either near or after the end of the Reaper War. It was a call he dreaded making, as he would have to admit to Yuán that Specialist Samantha Traynor, the love of her life, was in a medically induced coma after being gravely injured by an explosion—a goddamned Blue Suns booby trap—while participating in an ‘unofficial’ mission to assist Sandra Patton and Zaeed Massani in flushing Solem Dal’Serah from his lair in the Delta Ward of the Citadel.

Cody had actually heard from Massani, on his way to Omega Station in the Sahrabarik system aboard Iringù-Eßizkur; he was shadowing a commercial transport on which Solem Dal’Serah had booked passage from the Citadel, and wanted to confirm the location of Vido Santiago before returning to the Widow System. Yeah, right, Cody thought as he waited. Wily ol’ bastard won’t have to kill Dal’Serah after Santiago kills ‘im for leading Massani straight to his location. I’ll just bet Massani’s counting on that, and will either kill Santiago in the most brutal way possible, or allow him to think he’s making a clean getaway ... all while tailing him to wherever he goes next.’

As the comms unit on the Hong Kong locked onto that of the Normandy, a swirling mass of multi-colored pixels coalesced into a steady image of a tall woman with long, jet-black hair and eyes seemingly as black as a moonless night. The woman smiled, saying, “Hello Bill. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Cody’s mouth was set in a grim line, an expression that did not go unnoticed by Xiùlán, who asked in a suspicious tone, “Looks like this isn’t a social call ... what has happened?”

“Xiùlán, I have some bad news for you, and I don’t know of any good way to make this easier, so I’m just going to say it ... Specialist Traynor ... is in Huerta Memorial.” Seeing Yuán’s eyes widen in surprise, he quickly went on, “She was severely injured on a clandestine mission ... working with Master Guns Patton and Zaeed Massani.”

Cody went on to explain the details of what Sammy had done in support of Patton and Massani, concluding with Commander Cortez’s report on rescuing the women from a non-functional elevator in the sub-basement of the Suns’ Citadel Headquarters. “We got them into the intensive care unit in Huerta as soon as we extricated them, but honestly, it’s still touch and go, particularly for Patton.” Bill ran a hand across his nose and mouth, then added, “I’m so sorry, Xiùlán. It was my call that put Traynor out there; she was doing intelligence work in support of Patton and Massani ... she was armed and armored from the start. I never expected them to stumble onto a damned bomb.”

Xiùlán was silent for several moments, thinking about what she’d just learned. Finally, finding her voice, she asked, “Any of their injuries so severe that doctors in Huerta Memorial cannot treat them?”

“Dr Chakwas didn’t seem to be anything less than hopeful concerning their chances. They’re each
being treated in operating suites as we speak … most serious injuries first. Traynor’s having her pelvis mended under a bone-stitcher while a team of thoracic specialists treat her for pulmonary barotrauma and repair the injuries to her spleen. Once all that’s complete they’ll close her up, bone-stitch her fractured ribs, then let her heal a bit before going after the fragments in her eyes and repairing her ears.”

Cody took a deep breath, blew it out slowly, then continued, “Patton is being treated for the same type of internal chest injuries, along with orthopedic surgery for her knees and lower legs. They’ll look at her ears same time as when they take care of Traynor’s.”

“What about their concussions?” Xiülán asked. “Any reason to be concerned?”

Cody shook his head, saying, “The excess pressure on their brains has been relieved, but the doctors are keeping them both sedated in order to give them a chance to heal; and don’t forget the nanites we have courtesy of the Reapers. A lot of their injuries will gradually improve on their own, probably more completely without any intervention.”

Yuán looked down for a few moments before returning her gaze to her former captain. “Sounds good. Hopefully, Sammy will be awake by the time we make port.”

“You coming back to the Citadel?”

“Yes, and the reason is directly related to the Blue Suns; Admiral Hackett ordered the HKII home with all possible speed,” Yuán said. “Seems the legal division is going to bring Jason Joesiar to trial for attempted murder … mine, and Miranda’s. We both need to be there, as we’ll undoubtedly be required to testify against the miserable little húndán [混蛋 – bastard]. And, since we’ll be docked at the Citadel, it’ll give me time to visit with Specialist Traynor.”

“I did mention she’s in a coma, right?”

“You did, but Sammy will know I’m there, coma or no. Oh, and has Massani made it back?”

Cody shook his head slowly as he replied, “Not yet. He’s still riding around inside Iringû-Eßizkur; gonna follow Dal’Serah’s movements to Omega Station.” Cody reached a hand up to massage the back of his neck as he continued, “He’s hoping to have a solid location for Vido Santiago before returning to the Citadel.”

“He’s not going to attempt …” Xiülán started to ask, only to be interrupted by Cody.

“Massani’s assured me he won’t move on Santiago by himself. He wants the bastard dead just as much … well hell, more than I do. He’s not about to spoil a chance to have Santiago alone in a locked compartment so he can beat him to death with his fists.”

Yuán chuckled as she replied, “That’s rather amusing, Bill. You actually believe that old merc won’t take the opportunity to kill Vido once he has solid intel on his location?”

Cody chuckled in return. “I didn’t question the sincerity of his statement, Xiülán … Zaeed will do what he feels he needs to do in order to take down Vido Santiago. He survived getting shot in the head twenty-some years ago … I honestly don’t think Vido Santiago has a chance in hell of surviving another close encounter with Zaeed.”

“Okay Bill. We should arrive back in Widow in seventeen, eighteen hours, depending on relay realignment times. I’ll see you soon.” Yuán reached out to an unseen control on her side, causing her image to swirl and disappear.
An hour after Cody finished speaking with Captain Yuán on the *Hong Kong*, Commander Armando-Owen Bailey, accompanied by a big turian in C-Sec armor, approached the guarded ramp for the *Normandy’s* hanger deck and asked permission to enter the vessel in order to speak with the captain. A quick query over the comm resulted in the appearance of an escort, who led Bailey and the turian through the hangar bay to the elevator; after a ride to Deck Two, they were shown to the conference room, where Captain Cody was intently studying a datapad.

Looking up as the visitors walked through the scanner at the checkpoint, he tapped the control to open the sliding door and waved them both in. Bailey introduced his companion as Master Sergeant Esilaro, explaining he was one of the few survivors of a Blue Suns rigged explosion in Delta Ward.

“Get you something to drink, Commander? Master Sergeant?” inquired Cody, adding, “We have most liquid refreshments in Dextro versions.”

Replying as he took a seat, Bailey said, “That would be appreciated, Captain. Perhaps a glass of beer?”

Esilaro glanced at Bailey before responding, “A cold turian beer sounds good to me.”

Cody smiled, saying, “Coming right up.” He spoke into his comm link and waited for an acknowledgement before turning his gaze on his guests. “What may I do for C-Sec today, Commander?”

“Captain, reports I’ve read at headquarters mentioned an Alliance judicial hearing for our old friend, Jason Joesiar. Thing is, C-Sec would like to ask him a few more questions before he’s shipped off the Citadel.”

“His hearing is going to be held here on the Citadel, Commander.” Cody glanced up as an orderly carrying a tray with a trio of filled beverage glasses entered the checkpoint; he only had to pause a moment for the door to slide open. Setting the Dextro beverage glass in front of Esilaro first, he next placed a glass in front of Bailey, then Cody before setting the tray with two pitchers on the table between them. Continuing where he’d left off, Cody said, “I know you talked to him – Spectre Alenko accompanied you into the lockup at the end of January.” Turning his attention to the turian, he added, “Did Bailey fill you in about what was said?”

After taking a long, appreciative pull from the frosty mug of turian ale, Esilaro replied, “Yes, Sir. He told me Joesiar admitted to abusing a woman the Suns had in captivity, but he absolutely denied setting off the explosion in the warehouse … claimed a batarian was responsible, which actually makes sense, as a batarian also attempted to blow up my aircar—with me in it—once I was out of Huerta Memorial. Joesiar said he had a name for the warehouse bomber, but only if the death penalty for his own crimes was off the table.” Esilaro chuckled. “Bailey told ‘im he wasn’t going to cheat the Alliance out of giving him the punishment he deserved … which I completely agree with, by the way. The commander figured C-Sec would be able to track the murderous bastard down and arrest him. Evidence suggests the same batarian was involved in rigging my aircar to explode.”

Cody leaned back in his chair as he thought about C-Sec’s search for the perpetrator of a bomb blast that had nearly taken Esilaro’s life. “Have either of you come any closer to discovering who set off that bomb?”

“I’ve narrowed the list of potential suspects down to a couple of batarians,” Esilaro replied. “Both of ’em are more than simple foot soldiers. These guys are seriously bad people, Captain. I would really like to end one or the other; both would be a serious win.” Esilaro took another long pull from his
mug before answering. “Krin’lo Pakbagoh is the main suspect; the other one is Dra’chi Gafgäba.”

Cody chuckled, took a drink from his own mug and pushed the datapad he’d been studying towards Bailey and Esilaro as he replied, “I think your search may just be over, Master Sergeant. Look through that list of names, see if any jump out at you.”

Esilaro picked the datapad up with one hand as he used the other to down some more beer. After a few moments, he set his mug on the table and studied the datapad a bit more carefully. Finally, he looked up at Cody and asked, “Has this been confirmed, Captain? I’d been told about the explosion in Delta … it really was their headquarters? And these two casualties have been positively identified?”

“As best we can determine … the remains identified as Gafgäba’s were pretty mangled in the explosion.”

Bailey looked at the names as well, telling the turian, “Cody told me about that explosion after they managed to get their crew members out of the debris … they’re both in critical condition in Huerta Memorial.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Captain,” Esilaro responded solemnly. After a few moments of thought, he added, “So, they must have flushed Solem Dal’Serah out of hiding. Did that terrorist bastard manage to get away?”

Cody chuckled, finished drinking from his mug and replied, “Last I’d heard, Zaeed Massani was tracking him in the hope that he’ll run straight to wherever Vido Santiago is holed up. I actually don’t expect Zaeed to return unless he has their severed heads in stasis bags, but I’ve been wrong about him before.”

Bailey smiled at this, while Esilaro actually chuckled, his sub-harmonics adding a particularly malicious note to the sound. “If even half of what I’ve heard about that old merc is true, I expect you’re probably correct about Santiago and Dal’Serah not having long to live.”

As he finished his drink, Bailey stood to leave. “I appreciate you taking the time, Captain. A lot of my people really hated having you take security away from us, but I understand why you did it … had I been in your place, I would have made the same choice.” He held out a hand as Cody stood up. “Think I’ll go down to the morgue … see how many more Suns are laid out down there.”

Cody first took Bailey’s hand and pumped it once, then took Esilaro’s hand and did the same before saying, “If you’re religious men, you may want to say a prayer for Specialist Traynor and Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton … that they return whole from their injuries. You may also want to stop in to pay your respects and thank them in person for their service – that pair are responsible for every last fatality in that sub-basement …” he paused as the turian’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s correct, Master Sergeant. The only victims of that explosion were those two women … after they had killed every Blue Sun in the place.”

Esilaro flared his mandibles in an imitation of a human smile before replying with a touch of awe. “Then they are warriors of the highest caliber, Captain, as worthy of our respect as members of Palaven’s Blackwatch. I will make a point of it.”

Cody had heard of Blackwatch when the team had been pulled from Palaven before the end of the Reaper War. “That’s high praise indeed, Master Sergeant. I’ll be sure to pass that on to them if they aren’t awake when you stop in. Thank you for dropping by.”

Bailey added, “I don’t know how your people managed to get into that place, Captain. Probably
better I don’t know, but I’m certainly grateful for their efforts … and their sacrifice, if it comes down to it, but I really hope they can overcome their injuries.”

Esilaro nodded, then turned and followed Bailey out of the conference room. Cody picked up his datapad and followed them out to the CIC, where he asked Yeoman Coleen Pruitt to escort them out through the hanger bay. After they had departed in the elevator, Cody checked in with XO Adams to get an update on the ship’s status, then left for his quarters, where he intended to call Dr Chakwas to obtain updates on his injured crew members.

◊ SECURE ALLIANCE WING, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL · CITADEL ◊

Sandra Patton had been dreaming … she was with Specialist Samantha Traynor in the Delta Ward headquarters of the Blue Suns; their operation to flush the Suns number two from his office had quickly changed into a running escape from a series of bomb blasts, each closer to them than the last. In her dream, she could see a reflection of the flash from each but could not hear them, even as they continued to get closer.

She was trying to push Traynor ahead of her, make her hurry, when the final explosion hit her in the back, pushing her off a cliff that suddenly appeared in front of them. She was separated from the specialist—couldn’t see her anywhere—and she was falling into an abyss devoid of light and sound. The lack of visual stimuli and the absence of auditory cues was making her nauseous … she felt as if she was going to vomit, but there was nothing in her stomach to bring up. She tried to turn her body, but had no point of reference to know where to begin, what part to move first. She couldn’t feel her arms – couldn’t feel her legs. Is this what death feels like? That she could ask herself that question probably meant she was still alive.

She only gradually became aware of noise; it hadn’t existed a few moments ago … now, it was inside her head, a kind of rushing, water over rocks in a mountain stream sound. Her memory was beginning to return. She’d been underground, caught in an explosion. She could dimly hear a voice over the rushing sounds. It was as if her ears were stuffed full of cotton. She tried to open one eye —just a slit—only to discover she couldn’t; her eyes were bandaged. There was a gauze patch taped over each eye. WTF? Am I going to be blind? She groaned in protest. The voice again—directing someone to call Doctor Chakwas—at least, that’s what she thought she heard. Doctor Chakwas? Am I back on the Normandy?

“Sandra, listen to me.” Apparently, the Normandy’s doctor was hovering over her, checking her vitals. “Do you know where you are?”

She had to think about that. “Nor’andy?” she croaked out.

“No dear, you’re in Huerta Memorial. You were with Samantha Traynor … Both of you were severely injured by an explosion … Do you remember any of what happened?”

Patton tried to remember, but the images were jumbled … disjointed. Her clearest memories seemed to stop at a hatch – an entry to a black, multi-story building in Delta Ward; after that, pure chaos. There had been batarians, all firing weapons. She had killed a fair number of them with her shotgun; she remembered Traynor killing a few as well. She remembered looking … for data … discovering a trap … explosives in the desk … running.

Now, she was flat on her back in what was most likely a damned Med bed. She attempted to take a deep breath, but stopped short at the sharp stab of pain this simple action brought on. “Fuzzy …” she murmured. “Feels like … krog’n sitting … on chest,” she added, then, “Eyes? Blind?”
Doctor Chakwas was leaning down, speaking close to one ear, although Sandra could barely hear her words over the rushing noises in her head. “No, my dear. They’re bandaged to keep them closed. There are minute fragments … debris … inside them; result of the explosion. As for your chest, you’re recovering from surgery to treat a moderately severe case of pulmonary barotrauma – slang term is blast lung; you also had a dislocated shoulder … all repaired now, but you’ll be off your feet for a few weeks.”

An unseen hand gently caught her own as she tried to touch the bandages on her eyes. “We’re going to give you a few days to recover before we return you to a surgical suite, let the experts extract those particles from your eyes and repair the injuries to your ears.” Her hand and arm were returned to lie under the covers alongside her body. “An orthopedic surgeon repaired the torn ligaments in your knees, then set up the bone stitcher to treat your shinbones. I won’t lie to you, my dear – you’re fortunate to be alive. While Ms Traynor received nearly the same injuries, hers included a ruptured spleen and a bullet wound in her back. Oh, and you both have concussions.”

“Blue Suns? Still alive?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned about, Sandra … Commander Cortez did say there was no one left alive in that building. Whether some escaped from the upper levels after the explosion is unknown.”

Patton was tired … if she had been able to open her eyes, they would now be trying to close all on their own. Sleepy. Needed some more sleep. She felt a hand … cool … caring … caress her forehead. She needed to sleep.

♦

SAHRABARIK SYSTEM, NEAR OMEGA STATION · Omega NEBULA ♦

Zaeed Massani had reluctantly entered Iringū-Èßizkur’s structure once it became clear that Solem Dal’Serah had boarded a small batarian freighter outbound for the Omega Nebula. He didn’t want to leave the Citadel by himself, but as Sandra Patton and Samantha Traynor—seriously injured by an explosion after flushing Dal’Serah from his refuge—had been extricated from the wreckage of the Blue Suns Citadel headquarters building and taken to the hospital, he decided to put his dislike for the machine aside for the greater good – tracking Dal’Serah to wherever he went to ground. Massani felt sure the cowardly batarian would lead him straight to the heart of the Blue Suns, Vido Santiago. Once inside the Reaper turned Repository, he had talked to … her … damned if it ain’t difficult to think of these living machines as gender specific! … about the best way to follow the freighter.

›The freighter is a registered carrier of goods and people, Massani–Zaeed. As such, it will have a continuously operating transponder, by which I can track its movements with precision. The flight plan indicates a path through the Pax relay, followed by Hydra, then Iera, Balor, and on to Sahrabarik. I will shadow these movements closely. Dal’Serah will have to change to a different transport at Omega Station.‹

Zaeed had asked, “How do ya know ’e’ll get off at Omega, and why not jus’ fly dere direct?”

›He will have no choice. That freighter is on a dedicated run … Citadel to Omega and return. As for traveling there direct, it is more efficient for me to use the same relays. It makes more sense to follow the ship at a discrete distance. There are no intermediate stops on its schedule, but your quarry is a highly-placed officer in the Blue Suns. We need to insure an unscheduled mid-transit rendezvous does not take place.‹

As predicted, the batarian freighter followed its filed flight plan without deviation, emerging from FTL at the Omega relay in just under seven hours, the flight’s duration attributable to realignment
delays at each relay; the ship ultimately docked at one of the several combination ports near the middle of the multi-level commercial levels of the station.

As Zaeed had some time to pass during Iringù-Eßizkur’s flight through the relays, he had asked for and received an update from Captain Cody concerning the injuries to Patton … and Traynor. Learning that both women were listed in critical condition in Huerta Memorial only made him more determined than ever to not lose Dal’Serah on Omega. Massani didn’t know how he was going to track him once he departed the freighter, and said as much to Iringù-Eßizkur.

›Your quarry will need to acquire passage on another vessel outbound from Station Omega, true?‹

“Yes, but dat does me no gawdamned good,” he replied. “I need ter know ’is destination beyon’ any shadow ova doubt … wivout dat, I jus’ as well turn ’round an’ go back to der Citadel.”

›Massani-Zaeed. I will activate a portion of the equipment set up by T’Soni-Doctor. You must input the keywords ‘Dal’Serah’ and ‘immediate departure’ and set the device to search. It will use my communications array to monitor every travel transaction logged by the station’s computers. The instant Dal’Serah-Solem purchases transit, the terminal will chime and flag the transaction with details of the vessel and its destination.‹

Iringù-Eßizkur’s intervention in Zaeed’s search for Dal’Serah was fortuitous, as he had no idea how to implement such a search, a fact he relayed to the Repository. Massani left the machine to its work while he wandered about the habitat area for a bit, finally ending up in the galley. Checking the stores, he discovered the ingredients for a first-rate meal of beer-battered fish and chips in the freezer – all he needed to do was place what he wanted on a plate, heat it in the oven for several minutes, then eat. He didn’t find any beer, but there was a partial container of turian brandy, something he knew better than to sample, as he didn’t wish to wind up pukin’ his guts out. In the end, he settled for water.

When his food was ready, he took it to the forward ‘lounge’ area to sit in one of the chairs, put his feet up and idly watch Iringù-Eßizkur’s progress through the nebula on the large, virtual viewport. He gradually became aware that every ship around him was staying well away, until he remembered that his frigate-sized conveyance was a Reaper destroyer. I mus’ be goin’ balmy ter forget I’m in a damned livin’ machine, he thought.

After finishing his dinner, he went back to the Broker’s equipment bay to check on the progress of their search. The unit monitoring travel transactions was still processing – so far, no sign of an outbound trip being booked by anyone named Dal’Serah. Zaeed thought, Bastard shoulda bought passage by now … Opening the internal comms, he said, “Iringù-Eßizkur … are there any ships in da vicinity ov da relay … or ’ave any recently arrived at da relay … what are registered ter da Blue Suns?”

›Standby…‹ After several minutes, the Repository answered. ›There are several … all are docked in a section of the station known colloquially as Blue Suns Turf. None have recently arrived. Additionally, there is a small, corvette-class ship that arrived two hours ago. It is currently on a vector for the transient docks one level below the others.‹

“That’s it! Dal’Serah either cannot … or dares not … book passage on a commercial ship. He’s gonna travel on a Blue Suns ship!” A moment, then, “I need ter get ter that ship, Iringù-Eßizkur … I need ter know if Dal’Serah boards it once it’s docked, an’ we need ter be able ter track it. I won’t trust what a privately owned vessel’ll leave its transponder on its entire trip … they’ll switch it off just before transitin’ da relay.”
Massani Zaeed. *I am unable to dock at the station. You will need to go there aboard the personnel carrier on which you rode earlier.*

Zaeed hadn’t travelled all this way to let Dal’Serah slip through his fingers. “Can you provide a trackin’ device … somethin’ I can attach ter da ’ull of dat thing?”

*It will be done. You may wish to armor up; also, you may need a rebreather.*

In a matter of minutes, Zaeed was ready to go. The space bike, as he had taken to calling it, was ready, and he had an electronic tracker that could be placed on the ship’s hull. Straddling the evil-looking contraption, he asked, “What about da vacuum out there?”

*As I will be controlling your conveyance, I will also surround it with a kinetic barrier … it will protect you from the space environment and allow you to breathe normally … for a short time. You will need to use your time in an efficient manner.*

“Just get me alongside da damned thing, Iringù-Eßizkur. Once I can see da dock, I may even be able ter land wivout attractin’ any attention.” Massani was nervous, but it was too late to change his plans. “Let’s do dis.”

The space bike hummed as it rose from the deck; once the outer hatch had opened, revealing a kinetic barrier, the machine slowly eased out of the confines of Iringù-Eßizkur’s outer chamber with Zaeed leaning down to clear the top of the opening. A kinetic bubble formed around the craft and Zaeed during its exit. Massani watched in trepidation as the bike steadied up on its course and rapidly picked up speed towards the Omega docks.

♦ OMEGA STATION · AT LARGE ♦

Zaeed, riding astride the Reaper-created space cycle remotely controlled by Iringù-Eßizkur, had touched down in an unpopulated area of the Blue Suns controlled docks, about 150 meters from the closest docked vessel. He had taken the precaution of activating his cloaking shield generator before his bizarre looking conveyance got too close to the docks; without a visible presence on the nearly silent machine, it appeared to be some sort of strange looking service bot – or at least, that’s what he hoped.

Once again on his own two feet, he was able to flit between the massive stacks of cargo and accompanying shadows in this dimly-lit area, until he was within 13 or 14 meters of the Blue Suns flagged corvette—a ship of similar design to the larger, batarian made Thar’Van class assault frigate—which was being loaded with the cargo sitting nearby.

Watching from the shadows, Massani spotted a human, dressed in what appeared to be a pilot’s uniform; this man boarded the ship through the main hatch ahead of the massive engine pods, prompting Zaeed to activate his comms and tell Iringù-Eßizkur, “Looks like they may be gettin’ ready ter shove off; I ‘aven’t seen Dal …” he paused for several moments, having spotted another figure approaching the ship. As this person dodged loaders and stacks of cargo, he walked through a pool of light long enough for Massani to identify him. “Shit! Dal’Serah’s ‘ere, Iringù-Eßizkur. He’s eading fer da ship. Stand by … soon as I see ’im board, I’m gon’a place da tracker.”

Zaeed could move fast when he needed to; after watching his batarian quarry disappear into the vessel, he quickly covered the distance to the port side auxiliary engine pod; an area about halfway along that housing, flared out two meters from the its structure like a stubby wing, or stabilizer, was Zaeed’s target. It was on this wing-like extension that Zaeed placed the device provided by Iringù-Eßizkur, who had told him to simply set the flat bottom device against any flat surface on the ship.
Turning it on would initiate the attachment locks, permanently bonding the tracker to the ship.

After confirming from Iringù-Eßizkur that the signal was being received, Zaeed moved back towards the open hatch where Dal’Serah had entered. There was no one else on the docks—certain that the batarian was still aboard, as there had been not enough time for someone to leave the ship and get clear of the docks—Massani watched and waited. It wasn’t until the hatch was closed and the cargo handlers had moved away that Zaeed returned to the space bike.

As he swung a leg over the frame to straddle the evil-looking machine, he noticed a pair of guards in Blue Suns-issued armor walking slowly towards him. As he still had his modified cloaking generator active, they couldn’t really see him, even with their heat-sensitive upper eyes; this didn’t stop them from being curious about what appeared to be a strange-looking repair bot.

Zaeed whispered into his open comms channel, “Okay, Iringù-Eßizkur… let’s leave nice and slow, before these two get any closer.”

The space cycle came to life, lifting straight up five meters before spinning on its axis; it headed out towards the massive kinetic barrier keeping the atmosphere in place on the docks. As it got within three meters of the barrier, Iringù-Eßizkur turned the machine upwards to climb alongside the edge of the safe environment until it was out of sight by the pair left behind. The Repository said, *I could see that placing a barrier around you and my transporter would have revealed your presence to those batarians. Now that you are out of sight, I will raise the barrier and bring you back.*

The machine pierced the barrier as Iringù-Eßizkur activated the kinetic bubble that protected Zaeed from the airless cold of space. As intently as Zaeed stared at the space in front of him, he only discerned the Destroyer’s form when he was within fifty meters of her nose. It was only a few minutes more before he was back inside the structure.

*You arrived back just in time, Massani Zaeed. The Drakfalor is spooling up its main engines and is backing out of the docking area on maneuvering thrusters. It will be approaching the relay directly.*

“*Drakfalor? Zat its name? And ’as it filed a flight plan?”* Massani was removing his outer armor now that he was back inside the Repository’s habitat area.

*Negative… A flight plan has not been filed.*

“You kin foller it through da relays wivout knowin’ its destination, right?”

*Affirmative. The addition of the tracker to the ship’s structure will give us an advantage. You may wish to have a meal and some sleep. I will alert you when the Drakfalor arrives at its destination.*

“Sounds good,” the old merc agreed. “Not much else ter do in da meanwhile. May as well get rested up.”

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE WING, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL · CITADEL ♦

♦ FOUR DAYS AFTER THE EXPLOSION IN DELTA WARD ♦

Samantha Traynor didn’t think she had ever hurt so bad in her life; it hurt to move, it hurt to breathe, it hurt to simply lie still.

She was recovering from the concussion sustained when she’d been slammed bodily into the back wall of the elevator while attempting to escape the bomb left for her and Master Guns Patton in Solem Dal’Serah’s underground bunker. Her insides felt as if they were on fire, attempting to take
more than a shallow breath of air hurt like all bloody hell, her shoulder pained her whenever she
moved, and there was the maddening itch she was sure was caused by the miserable drainage tube
inserted in her urethra. To top it all off, her eyes had been patched shut until an ophthalmologist
could extract the fragments floating around inside; she also needed tympanoplasty surgery to repair
her eardrums. She knew Sandee would be going in for eye and ear surgery as well, probably on the
same day.

Knowing that Sandra Patton’s injuries were every bit as bad as her own weighed on her conscience;
she felt she had failed Sandee getting them out of the Blue Suns’ underground headquarters before
they had been quite literally blown to hell. The two women were side-by-side in their Med Beds;
occasionally, a hand would reach across the small gap to grasp and hold the hand of a comrade – a
sister-in-arms, injured in an attempt to cripple the operations of the Blue Suns on the Citadel. They
had successfully flushed Solem Dal’Serah from his lair, and could only hope Zaeed Massani was on
the batarian’s trail.

Traynor was lightly dozing when she felt it – fingers, gently caressing her forehead and cheeks, then,
a single finger tracing along her lips gradually turned the corners of her mouth up into a slight smile.
She turned her head slightly towards her left; this caused the fingers to be replaced by a pair of lush
lips … the owner of which she would know anywhere, no matter how badly she was hurting.
“Xiùlán,” she whispered. The lips returned, their touch as light as the gossamer wings of a butterfly.
“Xiùlán,” she sighed in longing.

A whispered, “Look at all the trouble you get up to when I’m not around, Sà mǐ.”

Traynor’s smile broadened, even though she had only heard every other word over the waterfall
sounds that were her constant companion. “Why?”

Yuán knew about Sammy’s hearing, so placed her mouth alongside her ear and spoke normally.
“Had to return for the trial, Sà mǐ – Alliance is going to bring Joesiar up on attempted murder
charges. I have to testify, as does Miranda Lawson, but I’ll come visit you as often as I can.”

“MMmmmm … sounds good,” Traynor whispered. “What day is this?”

“It’s been five days since Commander Cortez and the Marines from the Normandy pulled you and
Patton from that elevator, my love,” came the reply. “After they stabilized you, they went into your
chest – removed the air from your pleural cavity, repaired your spleen and shoulder injury, then used
the bone stitcher on your ribs. You were placed in an induced coma for about thirty-six hours
afterwards to give your brain a chance to recover from your concussion.”

“Must be why my insides feel like they poured alcohol in there and set it afire,” she breathed in reply,
enjoying the sensations enflamed by Xiùlán’s presence. “How long you gonna be in port?”

“Only until the JAG office is done having me and Miranda testify against Joesiar—possibly ten days
—maybe two weeks at the outside,” came the reply. “I’m really sorry we won’t get some alone time
while you’re in here.”

“S’okay. You’re here … now. That’s all that matters to me, darling.” After a pause, she added,
“Hope my eyes are repaired and working before you leave. I really want to see your face.”

“And I want to look into your eyes, Sà mǐ. Wǒ duì nǐ de àì tài chǎng dì jǔ. [I love you is as enduring as the sky and the earth.] The corners of Traynor’s
mouth ticked up, returning the slight smile to her face at the sound of Mandarin spoken by her
partner in life. She attempted to respond in kind, only stumbling on a couple of the pronunciations.
Méiyǒu nǐ de àì wǒ de shēnghuó shì bu wánzheng de.” [沒有你的愛我的生活是不完整的 –
Without your love my life is incomplete.

Xiūlán smiled at that, as Sammy slipped back into blissful sleep, the feel of a cool hand on her forehead providing physical proof of Yuán’s loving presence.

**A/N:** Definition of **Backwash**, as it applies to the title above: A condition, usually undesirable, that continues long after the event which caused it. **Synonyms:** aftermath, consequence, result, upshot.
Every morning that you have awoken. Every nightmare that haunts you but you grit your teeth and still find a reason to smile. Every night when you sleep trying not to think of the gun, the knife, the poison. This is survival. It is ugly, born of blood. And fear and the dark. But this is true courage. And you were born with it stitched into your sinews and your bones. This is how you allow your soul to reset. For this survival will get the finest version of you yet. — Nikita Gill

*Ai* — [愛 - Love (Sam’s or Xiùlán’s meaning is ‘luv’)]
*AP* — Armor Piercing Ammunition
*CIC* — Combat Information Center
*Inamorata* — A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
*’Verse* — Merc slang for the Attican Traverse

♦ INSIDE IRINGÛ-ĔSIZKUR, AT LARGE ♦

Zaeed Massani was instantly awake and alert before the voice saying his name had finished speaking. The old merc never slept well when he was on a ‘job’, and hunting through the ’Verse and the Terminus for the leaders of the Blue Suns was much more than a simple job to Massani; it had become his *Raison de vivre* — his reason to live. Additionally, he had left the confines of planetary gravity and atmo in order to ride around in an ‘old machine’; certainly not in any way his first choice for transport.

He had originally accepted an offer from the Systems Alliance Navy to assist Captain Bill Cody in his quest to not just rein-in the Blue Suns, but to totally eliminate their ability to operate in the galaxy at large. He had jumped at the opportunity to take his revenge on Vido Santiago, after missing an opportunity on Zorya during Commander Shepard’s campaign against the Collectors; that Shepard was to blame for the missed opportunity was water under the bridge to him. He had another chance and, this time, Massani was going to ensure that Vido endured more pain than anyone had ever experienced.

He heard the voice again while getting to his feet and looking about him—it was a feminine sound with mechanical overtones, combined with the musical sounds one might associate with a symphony orchestra—if that orchestra was using instruments never heard by human ears, or even dreamed about by anyone—of any race—in this modern age. *Massani Zaeed. The Drakfalor has reached its terminus.*

“So, where are we, then?” Casting a gimlet eye at the chrono displayed in the virtual viewport, he added, “We been travelin’ fer near on ter six hours.”

*We are near Susskind Station, an outpost in the Raheel-Levya System. The Blue Suns have a business within, called Blue Suns Cartage and Distribution. I am unable to confirm the departure of Dal’Serah-Solem from the vessel – you will need to go aboard the station in order to obtain that confirmation.*

Zaeed didn’t have to think twice about what he needed to do. He could feel it in his gut – he was close … so damned close to Vido Santiago. Dal’Serah hadn’t traveled all this way on a whim, this leg of the trip especially. A Blue Suns flagged corvette wouldn’t have been sent to Omega for Dal’Serah unless the need to retrieve him was dire. After stumbling over the old machine’s full name
numerous times, Zaeed had come to an agreement with Iringù-Eßizkur to simply address her as ‘Irin’ … pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’; she had agreed the pronunciation was close enough. “Irin … I ’ave ter follow dat goddamned batarian! Can ya get me close ter where dat ship’s docked?”

›Affirmative. Additionally, I can monitor your progress within the station; I may even be able to afford you some influence over station alarms and security comms, should such prove necessary.‹

“Right, then. Do I need ter ride dat space bike, or can you set me down on da docks?”

›You will need to use the personal transport. My presence at the docks would not pass unnoticed by the authorities. That would jeopardize your mission to track down and find Dal’Serah and Santiago.‹ The construct paused for several moments before continuing in a somewhat subdued voice. ›I have been informed by Asharru that Hong Kong-frigate has docked at the Citadel. Yuán-Captain visited Traynor-Specialist, who is … healing … along with Patton-Master Gunnery Sergeant. Both women are expected to recover—in full—from their injuries.‹

“No goddamned thanks ter Solem Dal’Serah,” came the bitter reply. Zaeed had been getting armored up while Iringù-Eßizkur was speaking. He docked his heavy pistol on his hip; pulling an assault rifle and sniper rifle from his gear bag, he docked each on the hard-points on his backplate. He continued speaking as he checked the operation of his shield generator. “It’s good ter ’ear they’re getting’ better, Irin. I would regret da death of either of ’em, but it wouldn’t keep me from hunting Dal’Serah … or Santiago … I ain’t been dis close ter Vido since Zorya, an’ I damn sure ain’t gonna waste dis opportunity.”

›Very well, Massani-Zaeed. Look in the small cabinet at the entrance to the observation deck. There you will find a comm unit you can place in your ear; it will enable me to monitor your location and offer guidance in your search.‹ The omnitool on Zaeed’s wrist came to life for a moment as Iringù-Eßizkur continued, ›I have downloaded a schematic of the station’s layout—it may be of assistance should communications between us become interrupted.‹

“Sounds good, Irin.” Zaeed moved to the outer compartment, where he inspected the ‘space-bike’ for several minutes. He felt a sudden onset of mild nausea, brought on, no doubt, by looking at the weird lines and oddly intersecting angles and curves of the unholy construct he was about to straddle. “Dammit! The way dis thing is put together is makin’ me sick ter me stomach, Irin. Is dat intentional?” He swallowed down his urge to vomit as he straddled the odd-looking machine.

Of surprise to Massani, a touch of snarkiness was evident in the construct’s voice as she replied, ›It is intentional. Sick individuals, of any species, are less effective in defensive combat.‹ After a brief pause, she added, ›Ready for deployment.‹ Zaeed’s response was a terse, “Let’s get on wiv it.”

♦ ALLIANCE LEGAL OFFICES AND COURTS, PRESIDIUM · CITADEL ♦

“Guilty on all counts,” the bailiff intoned, reading from the datapad he had been handed by the judge after receiving it from the ranking officer on the jury.

The military judge thanked the three men and four women—a mix of officers and enlisted personnel—for their service before adding, “The defendant shall be returned to custody … Bailiff!” The gavel descended to explosively contact the polished sounding block as the judge added, “Court is adjourned.”
As the bailiff said, “All rise,” his words were nearly drowned out by an outburst of a string of obscenities, voiced loud and long by Jason Joesiar, as a pair of dour Marine guards swooped in and dragged him to his feet; one of the corporals held his wrists in a vise-like grip behind his back as her partner snapped a pair of binders on them. They ignored the vulgar tirade spewing from the furious man’s mouth as they half-dragged him to the exit beside the judge’s raised desk; once past the door, they goose-stepped him down the narrow passageway, the volume of his invective fading away as the hatch reclosed and he progressed back to the holding cells two levels below.

Miranda Lawson’s eyes were tightly closed as she held a hand, fingers balled into a fist, pressed tightly against her mouth while the screaming evildoer was whisked away. Having to re-visit the horror of her captivity by the Blue Suns with Joesiar sitting only a few meters away in the same room had nearly been her undoing; her testimony concerning the nature of her capture and captivity had, of necessity, been quite graphic at times—though not as graphic as the actual memories of her mistreatment, by Joesiar in particular—drawing more than a few gasps of shocked disbelief from several in attendance. The female members of the jury had seemed particularly affected, as if their faith in the inherent good of all people had suddenly been shattered. Of special interest to Miranda, listening to Captain Yuan’s recounting of the events leading to her rescue in Vancouver had presented her with some information of which she had previously been unaware.

Xiùlán stood, placing a gentle hand on the shoulder of the woman beside her. As Miranda came to her feet beside her captain, Xiùlán whispered, “I have an appointment for you with Sha’ira, Ms Lawson. Come on … it’s not far. I’ll walk with you.”

Miranda started to protest, but immediately thought better of it; her sessions with Sha’ira had always been beneficial. The purpose of the consort’s therapy was not to make Miranda forget – although that was well within the asari’s capabilities; Sha’ira gave Miranda the mental tools to deal with the horrors to which she’d been subjected. After speaking in a calm manner about the physical tortures inflicted on her by the Blue Suns, she knew that a session with Sha’ira would help her to once again put that past where it needed to be – squarely behind her. It was an unchangeable part of who she was; no matter the horrific nature of what had been done, she was stronger for the experience.
As he was traversing the empty space between the ancient, frigate-size transport and the station’s docking area, he glanced towards the intense light coming from his left side and was instantly struck by the utter irony of the leader of the Blue Suns Mercenary group hiding out on a space station that had been built for the singular task of studying the unique binary blue stars at the center of the system.

Iringù-Eßizkur had transported Zaeed to an isolated section of the medium-weight spacecraft docks, just a few klicks from the location where the Drakfalor was berthed. As soon as his boots were on the metal deck plates, he had disappeared into the shadows while Iringù-Eßizkur retrieved the machine he’d arrived on, before it could be discovered by anyone; he was too close to the leaders of the Blue Suns to want any reports about something unusual or out of place on the docks to reach their ears.

With his cloaking shield generator set to maximum, he silently made his way past the passenger customs and freight inspection areas, although if everyone working for this station’s security force was as careless as the few he had already witnessed, he could have brought all the weapons he was carrying through the checkpoints instead of having to skulk around in the shadows like a common smuggler.

Seeing as how station security seemed non-existent, he deciding to have a drink or two, so stopped in the first bar he saw after leaving the customs area. The Dogfish Head Alehouse had seen better days, which suited Zaeed’s needs perfectly – the interior was dimly lit, with most of the illumination being provided by a single dim lamp placed in the center of each small table. There was a mix of people inside – mostly humans, with a smattering of batarians; there was even a krogan, and a pair of salarians nervously watching the krogan from a table nearby. Zaeed circled the back edges of the room, taking note of the exits and clearest paths to each before settling for a table a couple of meters from a side exit. After a few minutes, a batarian waitress sidled up to the table to take his order.

“What can I bring you, human?”

Zaeed, aware of how easily his face could be identified, especially in the shadowy light inside this place, was sitting so as to present only his left side profile. “I’ll ’hav a beer, darlin’,” came the mumbled reply.

“Beer? We have batarian ale … bottled and on tap,” she replied in an uncertain tone of voice. “Will that be okay?”

“Sure, darlin’ … bring the bottle and a glass.” Massani watched with interest as the young female walked back to the bar, where she pulled a bottle from the cooler and grabbed a glass, then made her way back to Zaeed’s table. Setting the glass down, she opened the bottle and emptied the contents into the glass, forming a perfect head of foam. She set the glass down in front of Zaeed and waited expectantly while he took a couple of swallows.

“Damn,” he exclaimed as he used a sleeve to wipe a bit of foam from his upper lip. “That’s really good stuff.” The old merc had never embraced electronic payments, figuring it was just one more way for the authorities to keep track of his movements; he dug around in a jacket pocket for a moment and retrieved several credits, which he placed on the table for the waitress. “Is dat good for dis an’ another bottle?”

With a smile—or what Zaeed assumed was a smile—that revealed only a few of her needle-sharp teeth, she picked up the credits while replying, “Why yes … yes it is. Thank you. I’ll bring another bottle right away.”

Zaeed grinned as she retreated to bring another ale. He had purposely set out more creds than the two drinks were worth, figuring the small amount of additional money she pocketed for herself might
just be an investment, in case of future need. He wasn’t about to rush this operation – as long as Dal’Serah and Santiago were on this station, Massani would take all the time he felt he needed to ensure that neither would escape his special brand of justice. Smiling up at the young female as she brought his second bottle to the table, he activated his omnitool, took another swallow from his glass and began studying the station layout provided by Iringû-Eßizkur.

Massani had spoken with Iringû-Eßizkur after leaving the Alehouse; he knew the ancient machine was unable to independently track the movements of Dal’Serah and Santiago, but she could point him in the general direction of the Blue Suns stronghold on Susskind Station. The Suns’ operation here was rather small by their standards, but Blue Suns Cartage & Distribution enabled Santiago to keep his hands firmly on the tiller that guided all of the day-to-day operations of the mercenary group, galaxy wide.

After a couple of days spent exploring the passages and compartments bordering their front office, Zaeed had a good sense of the layout. Additionally, he had discovered a small bar located several meters down a passageway from the main entrance to the Blue Suns’ operation. Massani quickly learned that this bar, Jenedia’s Pub, while turian owned and unremarkable in nearly every way imaginable, primarily catered to humans and batarians; in Zaeed’s mind, this pub was special, as it was the only bar regularly frequented by the one man in the galaxy he was most interested in finding—and eliminating—Vido Santiago.

Once he’d found Vido’s favorite watering hole, Zaeed began planning exactly how he was going to capture the wily bastard – not for return to Alliance controlled space, with all their bleeding heart, hand-wringing Alliance brass and sensibilities … no, he intended to place Vido Santiago in a locked room somewhere on the station, where he would be methodically beaten to death by Massani himself. No advocates, no trial, no probation. Zaeed intended to beat the man senseless, let him recover a day or two, then beat him senseless again; he’d make Vido beg for death, something the old merc wouldn’t allow until he had wrung every last gram of pleasure from making him suffer.

But first, there was the matter of Solem Dal’Serah. The batarian didn’t have any support on the station except what Vido deigned to make available; considering his status as the Suns’ number two, it was the bare minimum Santiago felt obligated to provide – after all, it was Dal’Serah’s own fault that a squad of Alliance Marines had completely decimated the Suns’ security contingent on the Citadel. That Vido had been led to believe a fully armed and armored squad of professional soldiers had invaded and destroyed their offices was an omission of the full truth by the batarian. Dal’Serah knew his lifespan would most likely be significantly shortened if he dared to admit that two—just two—people had invaded his comfortable sanctuary in Delta Ward and killed every member of his team. That both were human—and females—was the bitter icing on the batarian’s insult cake!

Zaeed chuckled again as he thought about Dal’Serah failing to tell Santiago about the number of people that had managed to invade his inner sanctum. He also thought about Master Guns Patton and Specialist Traynor. Damned if those two hadn’t done the seemingly impossible. He hoped they were well on their way to a full recovery.

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE WING, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL · CITADEL ♦

Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton woke reluctantly, unwilling to leave the infinitely pleasant world of her dreams. As her mind gradually focused on reality, she realized the rushing noise that had been her constant companion since she and Specialist Traynor had been body-slammed by an explosion in the Blue Suns building they had entered had been replaced by … a slight ‘singing’ that was peacefully quiet in comparison to what she’d been subjected to.
Gingerly reaching up a hand, she used fingertips to inspect her face – eyes in particular. Discovering them to still be bandaged shut, she then concentrated … really concentrated … on listening very carefully in order to discover exactly where she was solely by auditory means. The only sounds she could hear were those produced by the monitor recording her heartbeat, blood pressure, respiration, and brain activity. It was readily apparent that she was still lying in a Med bed in a ward of Huerta Memorial. She remembered Dr Chakwas telling her of the surgeries she would be having … to repair her eardrums … and her eyes; she now knew beyond any doubt the tympanoplasty had been successful, although she would need to have the packing in her ear canals removed in a couple of days. What she was unable to determine was the success—or failure—of the surgery needed to remove fragments embedded in her eyes; that would be determined when the patches were removed.

Thinking of the Normandy’s doctor led to another thought. Traynor! Where in hell is Sammy? She used her hand again, reaching to her right, attempting to touch an adjacent med bed. Meeting nothing but empty space, she reached across to her left, only to be disappointed once more. Concentrating on the small amount of noise in the room, she realized the muted sounds from her own monitors were not being doubled by a patient in an adjacent bed, as had been the case before her two surgeries. Clearing her throat … Damn! I could really use a bit of water, she croaked, “Sammy? Are you in here?” After a few seconds with no response, she repeated her question. “Sammy?”

As she attempted to locate the ‘attendant call’ device on the frame above her head, she heard the soft hiss of the pocket door sliding into its recess, followed shortly by a gentle hand touching her own. “Rest easy there, Master Guns,” said a familiar voice. “Everything is fine … your surgeries proceeded precisely as expected. I’m sure you can hear me once again without straining; the packing will be removed in a few days, and we’ll remove the patches over your eyes, probably tomorrow morning.” Karen Chakwas slid a hand under Patton’s head as she freed her other hand; Sandra felt her head being lifted slightly as the edge of a cup was placed against her lower lip. “Here’s a bit of ice, my dear. Sounds to me like your throat is dried out … probably from having to breath the dry, sterile air in this facility.”

Patton reached up to take the small cup from Karin’s hand as she whispered, “Thank you.” After sipping a bit of the ice melt water, she asked, “Where’s Specialist Traynor?”

“There was a complication … we had to return her to the surgical suite. Her left ear was more seriously damaged than originally thought, but her doctor has every confidence in being able to correct the problem. She’ll be back in here this afternoon.” Karin raised the bed’s upper section to improve Sandra’s comfort level as she was speaking. “I have to go back to the Normandy for a bit … is there anything you’d like me to bring from your quarters?”

Patton thought about the question for a few moments before responding. “I’d really appreciate learning if my weapons were returned to the ship, and …” she paused, then continued in a voice tinged with a shyness she had never before displayed, “… I’d like to hear how Zaeed is doing.”

Karin’s smile colored her voice as she replied, “Your weapons are safe aboard the Normandy, Master Guns. Matter of fact, Corporal Andrews personally cleaned and serviced your shotgun before inspecting and servicing your Helix rifle. Everything is in excellent condition and stored in your equipment locker.” Patton started to ask how he had gained access to her locker when Karin added, “Captain Cody provided the override for your locker … once the guns were stashed, he relocked it. You’ll have to see the captain in person to get your new access code.”

Handing the remote control for the bed to Sandra, the doctor said as she walked towards the sliding door, “As to Zaeed’s progress, I’ll ask Cody to send an inquiry to Žiuk’Durman … he can find out from Iringù-Ebizkur how your mercenary friend is doing.” Hearing a whispered “Thank you,” from the woman lying in the bed, she left the compartment, intent on learning how Specialist Traynor’s
surgery was progressing before returning to the *Normandy.*

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**SUSSKIND STATION, AT LARGE · RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM**

Zaeed had spent a number of hours during the two days following his arrival scouting for locations he deemed necessary for holding a couple of prisoners. His original intent had been to simply insert a bullet between Solem Dal’Serah’s eyes, after which he intended to use his fists to beat Vido Santiago to death. After some reflection and no small amount of soul searching, and with thoughts of an injured Sandra Patton foremost in his mind, he had decided to send Vido back to the Citadel, trusting that Captain Bill Cody would ensure the miserable leech at society’s throat would receive a punishment in keeping with his crimes against society over a span of over two decades. The old merc chuckled to himself as he stalked through the shadows of the station’s machinery levels; having made the decision to send Vido back to the Citadel certainly didn’t mean Zaeed’s previous plan of pummeling Vido senseless was going to be abandoned.

Earlier in the day, an obviously still sleepy Dal’Serah had walked right past a cloaked Zaeed without noticing him, affording Massani the opportunity to stick a tiny transmitter on the shoulder of the batarian’s overshirt; this bit of good fortune granted Massani a luxury he normally didn’t have when searching for a bounty – Iringù-Eßizkur could track the signal anywhere on the station, enabling Zaeed to employ his omnitool to follow Dal’Serah while hanging back out of sight.

After downing a good-sized breakfast the morning of the third day, Zaeed felt he was ready to make a move; Dal’Serah had met with Vido the previous evening; while not an absolutely sure bet, the old merc felt reasonably sure Jenedia’s Pub was Vido’s regular watering hole, its short distance from the Blue Suns Cartage business where Vido spent his days being the big draw.

After a bit of research, Massani discovered one emergency exit emptied onto an alley that ran past the rear—and hidden entrance—of the Blue Suns location. Thinking, *Perfect… now all I have to do is get the bastard running in that direction,* the old merc continued to mull over the options for getting Vido to run like a scared rabbit as he walked towards the nearby Suns’ residential unit, where he intended to finally confront—and possibly terminate—Solem Dal’Serah.

Susskind Station, by the very nature of its modular design, was not an easy place in which to find ones’ way around, a fact Solem Dal’Serah found extremely annoying. The big batarian had taken a few wrong turns in the days since he’d arrived; while being on the run from other mercenaries, smugglers, or even slavers, wasn’t a new experience, what was new was being on the run from the Systems Alliance. The damned humans, it seemed, had decided to put a stop to the Blue Suns’ activities in and around the Citadel, beginning with the surprise assault on his office in Delta Ward.

Having discovered that the elimination of his entire contingent of loyal fighters as he made good his escape from the station was the work of two … just two … soldiers—a Navy technical specialist and a Marine—had been a bitter pill to swallow, but to learn the two humans were females doubled the insult to the batarian’s pride; upon hearing this, Dal’Serah had pinned his hopes on the bomb in his desk having eliminated them, only to learn the pair was not only alive, but recovering from their injuries in Huerta Memorial’s secure Alliance controlled wing. He realized if Santiago heard the truth about the assault—that he had run like a coward from a pair of human females rather than face them—his tenure as the Blue Suns number two, already on shaky ground with the insufferable human, was finished.

The grumpy batarian continued to fume as he thought of ways to regain his standing in Santiago’s eyes, so paid scant attention to the few people he came upon, until he rounded yet another corner in the maze-like system of walkways in this corner of the station. The first indication that more trouble
had just found him was the words, “Hello, ya miserable squint!” followed by sudden, excruciatingly intense pain as the cartilage immediately above his nostrils was wrecked from a tremendous impact, such that he nearly fell over backwards. The blow partially spun him around, and he only managed to keep from falling to the deck by flinging an arm to the side, where his hand found purchase on the adjacent wall.

Blinking his eyes rapidly in an attempt to overcome the greyness of an impending blackout, he clamped his other hand firmly against his severely bleeding nose and face and looked about to see who had attacked him in such a cowardly manner. The voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. “Surprised? Did ya think fer even one minute ya could ’scape my reach, ya four-eyed bastard?” The impact of the second blow drove the air from his lungs in a WOOSH that sent an aerosol cloud of bloody mucus and saliva droplets in every direction, as Solem doubled over and fell to his knees from the assault on his body.

Gasping in a nearly vain attempt to regain some control over his spasming diaphragm, Solem now feared for his life; his unknown assailant had totally eliminated any thought of retaliation, even if he could have seen him. Finally gulping enough air to speak, he moaned out past the hand still attempting to staunch the flow of blood, “Whadaya wan’ wi’ me?”


“Where?” Dal’Serah managed to croak, still partially bent over from the body blow.

“Jus’ keep walkin’,” intoned the old merc, still completely cloaked and invisible to even a batarian’s heat-sensitive upper eyes. He only had to move Dal’Serah forty or fifty meters to the isolated compartment he’d discovered during his explorations. Once there, he scanned the batarian top-to-bottom with his omnitool; satisfied Dal’Serah had no weapons stashed in his clothing, Zaeed slid the door open, shoved the batarian inside, then closed and pass-locked the hatch. The compartment had once been a refrigerated meat locker, so was well insulated. Zaeed had left water and an empty bucket inside, and the air supply came from the station’s HVAC system, so Dal’Serah wouldn’t suffocate … and Zaeed intended to have him and Vido Santiago off the station in less than thirty hours.

Touching the comms unit inserted in his ear, he said, “Irin. Contact yer friends in der Widow System … tell ’em tha’ Cody needs ter bring da Normandy here. I have a coupla prisoners needin’ transport.”

›Massani-Zaeed. While you in fact have one prisoner to move, you do not have two.‹

“I will by the time the ship arrives, Irin. Send the message.”

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE WING, HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL · THE CITADEL ♦

Samantha Traynor felt trapped in the realm between fully asleep and fully awake, no doubt a result of the anesthesia she’d been given; it didn’t help that she was still unable to open her eyes, but her hearing seemed to have been fixed, as she no longer had to endure the rushing water sound induced by her damaged eardrums and middle ear.

She was conscious enough to bring a hand up to her face, there to see if her eyes were still bandaged
—they were—and to feel for bandages on her ears; she discovered her left ear canal had some kind of packing inserted, and there was a patch on her right ear. As she was trying to decide what to do next, a soft, lightly accented voice said her name. “Sà mì?” Traynor had never met anyone else that pronounced her name in such a manner, making it sound more exotic and special than she felt it actually deserved. Turning her head towards the voice, the corners of her mouth ticked upwards as she breathed the name of her Inamorata. “Xiùlán.”

Her hand, reaching out for her unseen lover, was intercepted in mid-flight by a pair of hands, at once soft and callused, the long fingers gently stroking Traynor’s fingers and knuckles before applying soft lips to the back of her hand. “I’ve missed you, Sà mì … missed your touch, your body next to mine. When are they going to allow you to leave, my love?”

Traynor pursed her lips as she tugged on the hands stroking her own, pulling her lover in close for a kiss. After using her mouth to caress a willing pair of lips, she reluctantly released them to reply to the question, saying, “Honestly don’t know, Ai. I’m feeling like a total invalid – almost as if I’m being a burden to everyone around me.”

“You’re no burden to anyone, Specialist.” The statement, coming from the other side of her med bed, startled her.

“Shit! Don’t sneak up on me, Sandee!” came the sheepish reply. “Nearly jumped outta my skin.” She felt fingers touching her arm through the blanket, causing her to slide her own arm out towards a waiting hand. Squeezing Patton’s hand with her left hand and Yuán’s with her right, she continued, “I’m glad to have you beside me, Master Guns.” Turning her head towards the right, she added, “And it’s wonderful that you’re here as well, my love. It’s really hard to be lying in this bed, blind … partially deaf. I’m getting really antsy to be up and around, even if it’s only to walk about in the hospital.”

She sighed heavily as Patton gently squeezed her hand and quietly said, “Traynor, I don’t know where in hell you got your combat training, but you need to know you are welcome to accompany me anytime, anywhere. I’ve never seen such a kick-ass performance from someone supposedly trained as a simple comms tech. You’re a survivor … and one helluva soldier. Don’t ever let anyone try to tell you otherwise.”

Even though neither woman could see Xiùlán, she smiled at Patton’s opinion as she nudged Sammy and asked, “That’s high praise coming from the master gunnery sergeant, Sà mì. Sure you don’t want to change your service affiliation?”

“All I did was hack a few well-secured doors, then watch her back,” Sammy responded in a voice tinged with embarrassment at Patton’s high praise. “Once I managed to get us inside that rat’s nest, she did most of the heavy lifting.”

Patton wasn’t having any of Sammy’s modest explanation of her part in their mission. “Traynor, you went after those batarians with a ferocity akin to a krogan,” she exclaimed. “You saved my life twice, at least. Don’t you dare think for a moment that I’m gonna leave your contributions out of my after-action report. That thing with the omni-blade? Simply amazing.”

Sammy smiled just a bit and was beginning to formulate a rebuttal when Xiùlán spoke up. “The important thing is you’re both alive, and on the path to recovery.” Releasing Sammy’s hand, she walked around the two med beds to stand beside Sandra, where she gently took the Marine’s free hand, saying, “And I have some news for you, Ms Patton. We’ve had word from Iringù-Ebízkur … she’s in the Raheel-Leyya System, requesting that Normandy meet her there in order to transport a pair of prisoners back here. Massani is on Susskind Station … seems he’s captured Solem Dal’Serah, and he has Vido Santiago in his sights. Looks as if all the pain you and Sà mì went
through is going to pay off.” Pausing for a moment, she chuckled as she added, “Hell, it’s paid off already if he has Dal’Serah. If he can take Santiago alive …”

Hearing the Massani was alive and apparently successful, at least in part, gladdened Patton’s heart. “That’s good to hear, Captain … really good to hear. If he’s asking Cap’n Cody to come after them, means he’s thought better of beating them both to death where he found ‘em.”

Xiùlán agreed. “Having them here on the Citadel to stand for their crimes will go a long way towards curtailing the Blue Suns’ activities, both here on the station and in this quadrant.” Moving back to stand beside Samny, Yuán added, “I also have a bit of news you’ll be interested in, Sà mǐ. Joesiar’s advocates couldn’t get him off for his crimes against Miranda and myself … he was convicted on all the charges against him.”

Traynor smiled at that. She felt there must be a special place in hell reserved for people of Joesiar’s ilk; that he would finally face some punishment for all his crimes was a good thing. “What about appeals, Luv?”

The smile in Xiùlán’s voice was apparent as she replied, “He could attempt to appeal the verdict, but honestly? He was tried in a military court because of his crimes against Miranda Lawson and myself. That she was a civilian when the Suns took her captive wasn’t an issue. She was under my protection when they attempted to kill me and take her back between the Hong Kong and Huerta Memorial; Joesiar taking a long-range shot at her—the one my backplate intercepted in the room across the lobby from here—and the attempt led by him on the docks when we were off the ship made it a matter for the military.”

The nearly silent swish of the split door retracting into its pockets caused Xiùlán to turn to see Dr Chakwas enter the room. “Captain Yuán … good to see you again. How are you today?”

“Great, now that I’ve seen Traynor and Patton. Should I leave?”

“No necessary, Captain. I just stopped by to tell these two they’ll be able to see again … the bandages on their eyes will be removed later in the day.”

Patton and Traynor each exclaimed “Excellent!” and “Wonderfull!” nearly together, as Xiùlán and Karin smiled at the pair.

♦ JENEDIA’S PUB · SUSSKIND STATION ♦

Vido Santiago’s aggravation level was increasing with every sip he took from his second drink of the evening; Solem Dal’Serah was late for their meeting. Thinking back to what Zaeed Massani had told him when he learned Vido was hiring batarians to work for the Suns as cheap labor —goddamned terrorists— Vido was inclined to agree at times, not that he’d ever admit to it. Tonight was one of those times. Unreliable terrorists, at that, came the thought.

He had just about decided to leave when an oddly familiar voice, reminiscent of loose gravel being scraped over moist slate, sounded from behind him. “Santiago, ya goddamned miserable sonovabitch. Ya waitin’ fer someone?” This was accompanied by the firm contact of what felt like a very large diameter, very cold metal pipe at the back of his neck.

Placing his hands flat on the table, Santiago replied, “Well now, if it ain’t Zaeed Massani. How in hell have you been?”

The alcohol and cigarette smoke influenced chuckle sent a shiver of fear down Vido’s spine. Unlike
his dealings with the cowardly batarians under his command, Zaeed was not someone who could be bought, bargained with … or even persuaded. “I’ve been fine, Vido … jus’ fine,” came the reply in a graveyard whisper. “Thing is, I’m ‘bout ter be finer still. I’m gonna tell ya what I need ya ter do … if ya wan’ ter go on livin’, you’ll follow my direcshuns to da letter, un’erstan’? If I even suspicion ya’ve signaled any of der goddamned soldiers I see drinkin’ in dis miserable place, you’ll be dead where ya stan’. Now, down dat drink an’ stand up, slowly, wif yer hands flat on dat table.”

Vido was thinking furiously, attempting to come up with a way to turn the tables on this old merc that didn’t end with his death. There were several turian members in the bar, but none were close, and Vido wasn’t even sure they knew who he was. He carefully finished his drink, closing his eyes at the burn of the alcohol sliding down his throat; after setting the glass down, he placed his hands closer towards his torso and began pushing upwards, letting the backs of his legs shove the chair away as they straightened. The pipe on his neck came right along, the pressure never varying in the least. A hand came down on the shoulder opposite of the gun’s position as the gravelly voice commanded, “Walk.”

With the hand guiding his path, Vido did as he was told. He received a couple of odd looks from the turians he had to walk past; he didn’t understand why in hell they didn’t intervene to stop a gunman from forcing him from the bar. He reached a side exit, activated the door and went through into the narrow, deserted pathway beyond. The hand spun him around to face his kidnapper. “Zaeed, we can make a deal.” At least, that was what he’d intended to say. He barely got the first syllable past his lips when they were forcefully smashed back into his teeth by a gauntleted fist which also broke his nose. Staggering back with a hand to his face, he used his right hand to pull and open a folding knife, which he attempted to use against his unseen assailant. The armored toe of Zaeed’s foot connected with Vido’s crotch, doubling him over in agony. He dropped the knife as he sought to assuage the intense pain.

“I’ve been dreamin’ ’bout dis day fer over twenty years, Santiago. Ya shoulda finished da goddamned job when ya had der chance. Now, yer gonna pay … in spades.” So saying, the gloved fist struck again, catching the hopelessly outmatched criminal in the temple – this knocked him to the metal deck, where the toe of a boot caught him in his unprotected ribs. “I fully intended ter beat yer ass ta death here on dis ruddy station, but I had a change o’ heart. Get up.”

Vido felt a pair of none too gentle hands grab the collar of his shirt and drag him to his feet. One of the hands grabbed first one, then the other of Santiago’s forearms and jerked them around behind him. As a pair of binders was clamped on his wrists, the voice spat out without any hint of sympathy, “Not takin’ any chances on ya makin’ a break fer it. Now walk.”

In less than ten minutes, Vido found himself leaned up against a bulkhead next to a heavy door. Zaeed scanned Vido top-to-bottom, as he had done for Dal’Serah; finding no other weapons secreted in his clothing, Massani entered the passcode to open the door, then removed the wrist binders, activated the door and shoved him hard in the middle of his back as it began to open. Solem Dal’Serah attempted to squeeze past before the door had completely cleared the opening, only to catch Santiago falling into the compartment. “Foun’ some company fer ya, squint. If ya manage ter kill each other afore I get back, so much the better.”

With the pair safely locked away, Zaeed lit a cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke towards the overhead and sighed as he began a leisurely stroll towards the Dogfish Head Alehouse. All he needed to do now was have a beer or two while he waited for the Normandy to arrive.
Soul Mates: I don’t know how you are so familiar to me – or why it feels less like I am getting to know you and more as though I am remembering who you are. How every smile, every whisper brings me closer to the impossible conclusion that I have known you before, I have loved you before – in another time, a different place, some other existence. — Lang Leav

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Ionúin álainn – Beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Mo cheann geallta – My promised one (Gaelic)
Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

♦ ARMALI, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Liara T’Soni held the title of Doctor, earned after many years spent studying in universities, her knowledge honed and tempered during months consumed with digging and cataloging ancient artifacts on a number of inhospitable planets. However, the title of Lady before her name spoke to her standing as the leader of one of the great houses on Thessia, a position she inherited with the death of her mother, along with all the commandos of Benezia’s personal guard on Noveria.

The asari stood silently at the open hatchway of the military corvette that had brought her home. Beside her, near arm crooked at the elbow as a convenient handhold for her promised, Commander Rachael Anne Shepard looked out onto a brilliant spring day, noting with interest the House Armali commandos arrayed before them in a double row, lining the walkway between the landing pad where the asari corvette Ionsai had touched down and the smaller pad where the House shuttlecraft waited to whisk them home.

With an unseen nudge from Rachael, Liara glanced at her and smiled in that special way she reserved only for Shepard as she stepped out of the ship and began descending the ramp, Rachael a half-step behind and matching her step for step. Reaching the pavement at the bottom of the metal ramp, Liara smiled shyly at each of the two commandos standing at the head of the columns before turning her full attention to a solitary figure walking slowly towards her.

As the lone asari came close enough to identify, Shepard recognized her to be Liara’s father, Matriarch Aethyta. Stopping in front of the couple, the asari gave Liara her full attention, reaching around her daughter to engulf her in a warm embrace. “My Little Wing,” she whispered. “It is so wonderful to have you home once again.”

Liara returned the hug, moisture filling her eyes at the welcome so freely extended. “Father … It is good to be home. I have missed this place … and I have missed you.” Pulling back to look at Aethyta, she said, “I realize you know Commander Shepard, but am unsure if you know we have promised our lives to each other.” She looked at her father, unsure of what else to say.

Aethyta pursed her lips as she regarded the human, whom she only knew from brief conversations in bars where she’d been assigned to work as a cover for keeping a watchful eye on her daughter; one in Nos Astra on Illium, the second in Apollo’s Café on the Citadel. The matriarch held out her hands, palms up, waist high, in the traditional asari greeting; Shepard moved to reciprocate, placing her own hands palm down on Aethyta’s as she said, “Matriarch … It is my distinct honor to meet you on a formal basis, and to set foot on Thessia after hearing so much about its beauty from Liara.”
Aethyta, based on her brief conversations with Shepard during her campaign to stop the Collectors and, especially, during the Reaper War, had already decided that she liked this human. “I’m glad you’ve finally been allowed time for a visit, Commander.” Pausing for a moment to study Rachaél’s face, it dawned on her that she was looking at a younger version of the hardened warrior she had spoken with on the Citadel. \textit{How can that be possible?} she thought as she responded, “And, it’s just ‘Aethyta’, or ‘Thyta’,” as she moved her hands to grip Shepard’s forearms.

Shepard grasped Aethyta’s forearms in friendship as she responded with a lopsided grin, “Very well … Thyta. And it’s simply Shepard … or Rachaél, if you prefer. I have 60 days to relax and enjoy my return to a normal life – time I’ll use to forget the months it took for the \textit{Normandy} to return from the outer rim.” Bringing her head up to look behind the matriarch, shenodded towards the commandos as she continued, “But let’s not stand about any longer. I would love to see the country house and the estate … and, I imagine your commandos would rather be doing anything else than standing at attention in the sun.” Aethyta chuckled as Shepard looked around a bit, her brow furrowed as she briefly studied the buildings within view. “I hope the Reapers didn’t do too much damage outside the cities.” Returning her attention to Aethyta, she used her grip on the asari’s arms to draw her close, whispering, “And I need to meet with you privately, in order to discuss a matter of great importance to me … and your daughter.”

\textbf{♦ SUSSKIND STATION, AT LARGE · RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM ♦}

“Approaching Susskind Station, Captain.” Before Cody could respond to Commander Adams announcement, the XO added, “We have a visual on Iringú-Եիզկուր, Sir. She’s standing off about 35 klicks from the facility.”

“Acknowledged, Commander.” Rising from his desk, he said, “Contact the station’s approach control, ask them for a docking assignment away from the commercial traffic … and don’t let them try to tell you the space isn’t available. I’ll be in the war room while you take care of business.” As Adams acknowledged Cody’s instructions and began relaying them to Joker, the captain left his office on deck one; taking the elevator to deck two, he nodded to his XO as he exited the car and moved past the raised navigator’s platform to enter the starboard passageway.

After moving past the dual checkpoints and the conference room, he walked up to and activated the situation display, saying, “Iringú-Եիզկուր. Please respond.” The image of a Reaper destroyer quickly formed in the middle of the projection well.

\textbf{› Cody-Captain … it is a pleasure to once again speak with you. I am aware of Normandy-frigate’s passage past my position. May I assume you are here to relieve Massani-Zaeed of the humans he has captured?‹}

“That’s why we’re here, Iringú-Եիզկուր,” Cody replied. “Does Zaeed wish to return to the Citadel aboard the Normandy, or will he ride there with you?”

\textbf{› Massani-Zaeed has expressed a desire to return to the Citadel with all possible speed. He has informed me that I can outrun Normandy-frigate … to quote, ‘… six ways from Sunday.’ I believe he wishes to visit Patton-Master Gunnery Sergeant, He expressed concern regarding the injuries sustained by her … and Traynor-Specialist, during their assault on the Blue Suns headquarters in Delta Ward. I intend to retrieve him after the team from Normandy-frigate takes custody of his prisoners. He does not wish to leave until assured the human and the batarian are secure aboard Normandy-frigate.‹}

“I’ll contact you both as soon as the pair are locked up.”
Additionally, Massani-Zaeed indicated both may be in need of medical assistance. He said they did not submit willingly.

“Dr Chakwas will take a look at them once they’re safely restrained,” Cody replied. “I won’t risk the lives of any of my crew to take care of them.”

Very well, Cody-Captain. Logging you off.

HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, SECURE ALLIANCE WING · CITADEL

Sandra Patton, having finally been allowed to get out of her med bed, slowly made her way from her room to the small café that served the Alliance wing. At the insistence of Dr Chakwas, who didn’t want her to overstress her left leg, Sandee was using a cane to support part of her weight on that side; while both of her fractured shins had responded well to treatment, the torn ligaments in her knees were still healing, with the left knee taking longer to heal. In addition to exercising her legs on a press machine, she had been using free-weights to help heal her injured shoulder; fortunately, it was her left side that needed to heal. Patton was itching to get out to the small arms range … she felt like she was totally off her game after not firing any weapons for days, and needed to once again feel the kick from her Helix sniper rifle.

Entering the café area, Patton was a bit surprised to find Captain Yuán seated at a table in the middle of the room; the captain looked up and smiled as the master gunnery sergeant stopped in front of her and asked, “Are you waiting for Specialist Traynor, or simply having a cup of tea … and may I join you?”

Yuán’s smile grew wider at Patton’s mention of Sammy. “Have a seat, Master Guns … I could use the company.” Taking a sip from her cup, she continued, “To answer your other questions, I’m having a cup of tea while waiting for the specialist to arrive. May I bring you a beverage or a snack?”

Sandee pulled the chair out and gingerly sat down, sighing in relief at being able to relieve her knees of her weight. Commenting, “I am really out of shape, Captain. My legs feel as if I’ve just run a kilometer with full field-gear instead of simply walking here from my room.” Realizing Yuán had asked a question, she added, “A cup of coffee sounds really good, Captain.”

Yuán chuckled sympathetically, replying as she stood, “You were blown down a passageway by a damned bomb, Ms Patton. Your body needs time to heal.” Xiùlán moved to the counter, where she spoke to the attendant; after waiting a few moments, she headed back to the table bearing a steaming mug of coffee. Patton offered a subdued thanks, then grimaced slightly as the captain set the mug in front of her.

Xiùlán, noticing Sandra’s expression and the seemingly embarrassed tone of her voice, responding with a single word as she retook her seat. “What?”

Sandra shook her head slightly side-to-side as she answered, “Never known an officer to go out of their way to help an enlisted person. Seems strange.”

Yuán laughed at Patton’s statement. After taking another sip from her own mug, she cocked her head to study the woman sitting across from her and said, “Since when did a promotion to an officer’s rank require that person to forego caring about others? You’re recovering from some serious injuries … should I just ignore that so you can get your own coffee?” As Patton sipped her coffee and thought of how best to answer, Xiùlán continued, “It was a rhetorical question, Master Guns. We’re sitting in a hospital café … and I’ve never felt I was too good to help someone, rank be
Piroska's face was illuminated with a soft pink, her eyes bright. "I'm just glad you're doing okay. I know it must be difficult to be out of your own station," she commented, her voice hushed.

"It is," she replied with a slight nod. "But I'm doing my best to make it work. I've been trying to keep up with the work here, and I know it's not the same as being at the station, but it's the best I can do right now."}

While enjoying the last bit of tea from her own mug, Xiùlán detected new movement and glanced towards the entrance; it was Traynor, accompanied by ... could it really be? Rising to her feet, Xiùlán walked quickly towards her lover and the large man accompanying her. “No ... can it be, after such a long time? Sà mǐ! I’m so happy to see you up and around, even if you had to employ this beefy monster to assist you.”

The very large man, dressed in the all-white scrubs of an orderly, or nurse’s aide, grinned in recognition at Xiùlán. Offering his hand, he said, “Almost couldn’t believe it when the specialist told me she was going to meet you for a bit of coffee, Ma’am.” The hand swallowed Xiùlán’s as if hers was that of a mere child.

“Vinson? Emil Vinson? It is so good to see you again!” Xiùlán declared. “Is your friend, oh, what was his name?”

“O’Brian, Ma’am ... he’s still working here ... different shift, these days.” Vinson made an obvious show of inspecting her rank insignia. “And you made captain, Ma’am. That’s wonderful ... what ship?”

“I’m still on the Hong Kong,” she replied with a shy smile. “It’s been quite the journey.”

Vinson nodded as he pumped her hand once more. “I’m so happy to see you, Ma’am, and it’s really nice to know you’re totally recovered and still in the Alliance. I’ll leave you to your visit ...” He directed his attention to Traynor. “Anything you need, Specialist ... just ask for me. It’ll be an honor to assist you however I’m able.” With that, the big guy turned and left, moving with a grace that belied his massive bulk.

Xiùlán turned her attention to Traynor, beaming while grasping her hands. “Sà mǐ ... I was beginning to think I was going to have to visit you in your room after all. How are you feeling? Come ... sit with me. I’ll make a cup of tea for you.”

The specialist couldn’t stop grinning as Xiùlán fussed over her like a mother hen. After seeing Traynor to a chair, Yuán brought a fresh pot of hot water to the table, where she proceeded to make a cup of tea for Traynor and another for herself. When she was finally seated, Sammy looked at her and asked, “So, do you have any more news on Massani? I know the Normandy left to go after prisoners, but Santiago was still on the loose ... did Zaeed manage to bag ’im too?”

“He did.” Checking a nearby chronometer, she added, “Actually, he should be on his way back here aboard Iringū-EBizkur.”

“Really?” said Patton. “Much as he complained about being inside ...” lowering her voice to an imperfect imitation of Zaeed, she growled, “... a goddamned bloody Reaper, I would have expected him to fly home in the Normandy.”

Traynor sipped her tea as she glanced between Patton and Yuán. Listening to their conversation, she felt nearly overwhelmed with a sense of contentment and peace. She was glad to finally be out of her bed; being able to sit beside her Inamorata and enjoy a leisurely cup of tea simply added to her contentment. It was good to know that Massani had succeeded in his goals, and—without knowing why she felt this way—it was also good to know Iringū-EBizkur would soon be back in Widow.

♦ DOGFISH HEAD ALEHOUSE, SUSSKIND STATION · RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM ♦
Lt Commander Steve Cortez, accompanied by Marine Corporals Wilder and Andrews, was standing just inside the entryway to the bar where he’d been instructed to meet Zaeed Massani; looking about the smoky, dimly lit interior, he finally spotted the old merc sitting at a table next to a side exit. Thinking about his choice of tables, Cortez mused *Old merc has his back to a wall and wants to have an out if trouble comes calling …* as he threaded his way past tables and patrons to reach him.

As he came to a halt across from Zaeed, Andrews moved just past Cortez to set a travel bag next to the man’s feet as Steve said, “Hello, Massani. Brought your kit, just like you asked. Soon as you’re ready, we’ll take Santiago and Dal’Serah off your hands.”

Zaeed grinned, motioning for Cortez to sit as he took another pull from the large mug he was holding. Belching into the thumb side of his closed hand, he said, “Thanks, Cortez. I’ve been studyin’ da layout ’ere. How far is your ship from da commercial docks?”

Cortez’s expression was unreadable. “Captain Cody thought we’d be able to dock close by, but the port authorities didn’t want an Alliance warship berthed at their docks, so we came by shuttle … Lieutenant Morse is waiting for us to return. Wilder and Andrews are here to escort your prisoners to the shuttle.”

“Hope they’re ready fer a fight, Commander. There may be Blue Suns in our exit path.”

Cortez grinned in response. “I stationed a couple of heavily armed Marines on the docks near the UT-47 – once I tell them we’re ready to move the prisoners, they’ll intercept and accompany us back to the shuttle. Doesn’t mean we’ll get through this unscathed, but I think the odds are in our favor.”

Massani polished off his mug of beer, then stood, belched noisily and said, “Right then. Let’s push off.” Picking up the travel bag brought to him by the Normandy team, he led the way through the nearby exit and down a dimly-lit, deserted path – the same path he’d used to march Santiago to the abandoned storage locker where he now resided with a bitterly unhappy Solem Dal’Serah.
Rachaél smiled as she pushed off from the door and ambled up to the desk, saying, “I’m fine, Thyta. I was just thinking about the differences between my position here and my position on the Normandy—or rather, in the Systems Alliance.”

Aethyta chuckled lightly. “Am I to infer from your tone and your smile that you prefer to be here at the estate, rather than sitting in a command chair on a ship?”

It was Shepard’s turn to chuckle. “I haven’t sat in a command chair for close to a year. Have you heard the entire story?”

“Only what Councilor Tevos has shared since the Normandy returned from a trip to the Horsehead Nebula,” came the response. “My daughter hasn’t been as forthcoming as I would have hoped, simply saying that I’ll need to speak with you in order to learn all that transpired since the ship was returned to the Widow System locked inside a damned Reaper.”

“That will take some time.” Rachaél leaned forward in her chair; fixing the matriarch with an intent look, she asked, “Would you be willing to meld with me, Aethyta?”

The matriarch tipped her head as she contemplated Rachaél’s question. After several moments passed, she replied with thoughtfully measured words. “Commander, of all the questions I could have anticipated being asked, that one was least expected.” Aethyta stroked her chin as she contemplated the human sitting across from her.

“You realize a meld will allow me to access all of your memories, including …” at this point she smirked, “… your relationship with my daughter.”

Rachaél’s cheeks picked up a touch of pink, even as she replied, “I’ve heard a few stories about you, Aethyta … not all of them are flattering and comments like that are likely the source of some … but I have no intention of letting unsubstantiated rumors of your bad disposition become the center of this discussion.” Rachaél huffed quietly in disapproval, the tone of the conversation changing quickly as she continued, “My telling you everything that happened from the time I chose synthesis at the Citadel to our arrival back from the Horsehead Nebula would take more time than I care to devote to it, and I might inadvertently leave out details of great importance to our future relationship. A meld would allow you speed-of-thought access to my memories … memories that would seem unbelievable were I to simply tell you.” After pausing for a brief moment, she continued with, “Raesia Tevos chose to accept my offer when I returned from the broken Cerberus station. I believe it is the clearest path forward for you and me, Aethyta. I’m freely offering to do this – for Liara. However, relaying the basics of what transpired over that time period does not necessitate letting you access the intimate moments between Liara and me … nor do I believe your daughter would want that, so I will block those particular memories from you.”

The matriarch leaned back in her chair, thoughtful expression on her face as she looked at the human sitting before her. Her respect for Rachaél edged up a bit with her defense of Liara’s privacy. Never had she known anyone—of any race—with so much self-assurance, with the possible exception of Nezzie. “No offense was intended, Shepard, so I’ll apologize first … and then take you up on your offer. If you would allow me a bit of time to make a few arrangements, we can reconvene here in an hour.” Aethyta stood from her chair, prompting Rachaél to stand as well. “And bring Liara with you. I’d like her to be sitting close by, just in case she’s needed.”

“Thank you, Thyta. We’ll both be here in an hour.”
Commander Cortez, accompanied by Corporals Wilder and Andrews, had followed Zaeed Massani to the place where the old merc had stashed Blue Suns bosses Santiago and Dal'Serah. As they drew even with the door to what was obviously a refrigeration compartment, Massani glared at Cortez and said, “Spread out … no tellin’ what deese bastards might do soon as da door gets opened. Might wind up ’aving ter shoot bof ov ’em.”

Cortez smiled as he replied, “Corporal Wilder here is an engineer.” Looking first at Wilder, Cortez said, “Corporal, have your omnitool charged and ready.”

Turning his attention to Andrews, he added, “Ready your sidearm, Andrews,” as he pulled and charged his own M-5 Phalanx. Moving to stand a few paces to one side of the door, Andrews mirrored the move on the other side as Wilder stood ready with his omnitool in combat mode. Returning his attention to Massani, Cortez nodded as he said, “Open it.”

Massani nodded once; he entered the passcode to unlock the door, looked behind himself at Wilder, then stood to the hinge side and tapped the interface to release the latch. As the door swung open, a batarian came charging through the gap, only to be met with a massive electrical pulse that seemed to set all his nerves on fire, dropping him to the deck at Wilder’s feet.

Massani hollered at the remaining inmate. “Come on out, Vido, ’ands over your ’ead,. Yew an’ dis fuckin’ batarian are goin’ back ter da Citadel.”

The dull sounds of shuffling boots came to their ears as Vido Santiago slowly came out of the compartment. “What the hell? What right does the fucking Alliance have to take me, or Dal’Serah, anywhere?”

Corporal Andrews stepped up behind Santiago; placing a hand in the middle of the criminal’s back, he shoved him none too gently up against the far wall of the corridor as Cortez answered. “Mr Andrews here is going to place arm restraints on you for your safety … as for why the Alliance is taking you and Dal’Serah into custody, you are going to stand trial for numerous offenses against Systems Alliance property and personnel, not the least of which is three attempts to murder Captain Yuán Xiùlán …”

“That fucking chink was interfering in legitimate Blue Suns business!” Santiago hollered.

Cortez chuckled at the interruption. “It surprises me that you know about the Captain, Vido. I’m sure your statement—which was recorded, by the way—will go a long way towards getting you a stiffer sentence once you’re found guilty by a tribunal. You’re also going to be charged with extortion, fixing legitimate contests, human trafficking and promoting prostitution. Keep talking if you wish, but every word coming out of your mouth will be recorded as evidence against you.”

“Fuck you, Navy! I got lawyers that make more in a day than what you’re paid in a year! You can’t convict me of a damned thing – I’m innocent.”

“I don’t believe your high-priced lawyers will continue to work for you once your funding is cut off – or did you think that Blue Suns assets would be used for your defense?”

By this time, Andrews had the restraints on Vido’s arms. Spinning the surly man around to face him, the corporal said, “Try to run, those restraints will do this …”

A powerful electric pulse coursed through the restraints, forcing Vido to his knees. The man was nearly crying from the pain … and the humiliation. Zaeed stepped in and grabbed him by the shoulders, jerking him to his feet. “You shoulda let me put a bullet in yer ’ead back on Zorya, Vido. Would ’ave saved yew a whole lot ov pain and embarrassment.”
Andrews clipped a shield generator to Santiago’s belt while Wilder did the same on a similarly restrained Dal’Serah. When both corporals were satisfied with the arrangements for moving their prisoners, they energized their shield generators and began marching them towards the docks.

Cortez took point, while Massani covered their rear. They’d moved less than fifty meters when they saw a pair of heavily armored and armed Marines trotting in their direction. Cortez asked for, and received, the code word that guaranteed the men approaching were genuine. As one took over point for Cortez, the other trotted past the group to join Massani keeping watch on their six.

Massani trotted up through the group until he was beside Cortez. “What’s da purpose of puttin’ kinetic barriers on those assholes?” he asked.

“Need to keep them safe from their own people. I really doubt there’s anyone in the Suns that has any love for either one of them—surest way to be done with them for good and all is a couple of bullets as we try to get them to the shuttle—easy to blame the Alliance for not being able to do a good job.”

As the group rounded a corner, the Normandy’s shuttlecraft came into view. Cortez took a hard look at the vessel and the area around it. Muttering, “Something’s off,” he waved at those behind them. “Cover … now!” he hissed. As the Marines hustled their prisoners behind a low wall dividing the docks from the public access areas, Cortez was on his comms. “Lieutenant Morse … respond.”

Sherri Morse had remained inside the shuttle – though armed, she was by herself. Switching to her emergency channel, she replied, “Commander … several batarians in armor are using the shuttle for cover. They say they’ve attached explosive charges to the main thrusters … if I attempt to take off …”

“Are you safe?”

“For now … they haven’t attempted to gain access – they just want to eliminate their brainless leadership before the Alliance can get their hands on ’em.” Sherri sounded embarrassed as she added, “Not a lot I can do from in here, and if I open the hatch facing your approach, they’ll kill me before I can make it ten meters.”

“Okay, Lieutenant, stand by.” Cortez looked at his prisoners and said, “I was wrong about you Vido. You’re worth more to the Suns than we gave you credit for. Thing is, they want you and Dal’Serah dead. Alliance lockup doesn’t appear to be an option they’ll consider.” He looked around at the people with him and realized with a start that Massani was no longer with them. “Anyone see where that old merc got off to?”

Corporal Andrews replied, “I think he has a cloaking shield generator.”

Cortez shook his head as he said, “Well, shit!” Looking at the area at either end of the shuttle, the commander saw—something—what might be the edges of a cloaked body silently walking about 25 meters behind and to the near side of the UT-47’s stern. “Looks like Massani’s going to try to take them out for us.” Cody paused as he thought about this new situation. “Andrews, what weapons was he carrying?”

“Assault rifle for sure, and most likely a heavy pistol.”

Wilder added, “He asked me to loan him a shotgun, Sir. Didn’t think anything of it … gave it to him about the time we started walking here from that storage compartment.”

“Damn it,” Cortez muttered. He dare not try talking to Zaeed on the comms for fear of alerting the
Blue Suns hiding behind the shuttle. “If he surprises them, one of ’em still may have enough presence of mind to detonate the charges.” Thinking furiously, he remembered a tactic employed by Captain Yuán on the docks near the Hong Kong. Keying his comm unit, still on the emergency channel, he said, “Iringù-Eßizkur … please respond.”

>Cortez-Commander. What may I do for you?

“We’re in a bad spot, Iringù-Eßizkur. Would it be possible for you to quickly target the space side of our docked shuttle with your main weapon? There are a number of enemy combatants using the shuttle for cover, they’ve rigged it with explosives, and Zaeed Massani is attempting to close within shotgun range.”

After a few moments, the Reaper-Destroyer responded, ›I see them. Ialso see Massani. I will target your enemies and fire.‹

“Stun only, Iringù-Eßizkur, stun only!” Cortez was attempting to keep his voice calm. “If your aim is even slightly off target, you could hit Zaeed, and Lieutenant Morse is inside.”

>Stand by, Cortez-Commander.‹

It was only a matter of moments before the dimly lit area around the shuttle glowed in an intense greenish-white light, as if a small sun had hurriedly parked and just as hurriedly departed. Cortez was instantly on his comms. “Morse, report! Massani?”

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

A feeling of déjà vu swept over Shepard and she smiled; this time when she arrived at Aethyta’s office, Liara’s fingers were entwined with those of her own on one hand as she used the other to close and latch the door after they entered.

Also different was Aethyta’s response to their arrival; she was a matriarch and a parent, but Liara was the Lady T’Soni and Aethyta rose from her chair, offering a nod of respect. “Liara. Good morning. I trust you slept well; we missed you at breakfast.”

“Liara likes to sleep in when she can.” As the young asari blushed, Shepard smirked and continued, “With the pace of operations aboard ship, we don’t get many chances to indulge in that sort of luxury, so she makes full use of the opportunities we do receive. Today was certainly one of those days.”

“I suppose I can understand that, but what we’re about to undertake will require the expenditure of quite a bit of energy.” Aethyta’s gaze settled on her daughter. “I assume you’ve eaten.”

“Yes.” She smiled softly and looked at her siame. “Rachaël woke me with breakfast in bed so I would be prepared for this.” Turning back to her father, she finished with, “It was lovely to have the food of home … I’ve missed it terribly.”

The matriarch couldn’t help but smile. “And I’ve missed my Little Wing … and neither of us needs to miss either of those things ever again, do we? So, if you are ready, I suppose we should get to the business at hand.” She moved from behind the desk and held her hand out in open invitation. “Shall we sit on the couches?”

“Absolutely.” Shepard moved quickly to the center, sitting between the two Asari and holding both her hands out, one for each of them.
“No.” Aethyta’s voice was firm. “This meld is between you and I. We need Liara to remain an independent observer … for safety. Did not Tevos do the same when you melded with her?” The question carried a note of surprise that was assuaged with Shepard’s quick response.

Dropping her other hand, Rachaël nodded and replied, “Yes. Her First, Nizia Tenir, was the designated observer so I understand the need for such precautions. Though, Liara’s independent perspective would be extremely beneficial, for reasons you’ll understand soon enough.”

“If that’s the case, once we’re done here I will rest. Then, I will bring in one of the commandos to observe and Liara and I will do a second melding to fill in the gaps and provide that additional perspective.” Aethyta looked at her daughter, eyes full of question. “I had intended to request such a thing anyway … when the time was right … as there are many other things, private things, which we need to share and discuss.”

“Yes. Well …” Liara’s eyes took on a slightly haunted look, knowing she had yet to tell her father of the day her Siame had been forced to kill an indoctrinated Benezia. It was one memory Liara had absolutely no desire to share, yet she understood Aethyta’s need … and right … to know. “Let us see how everyone feels after this before we decide our path forward. Shall we?”

Noting the expression on her daughter’s face, Aethyta nodded in agreement before reaching out slowly to take Shepard’s hand. Rachaël accepted it willingly and closed her eyes as Aethyta whispered, “Embrace eternity.”

It quickly became apparent to the matriarch that Shepard had melded before … many times before … and she had a flash of both curiosity and jealousy. Curiosity because she wondered if all the melds had been with Liara … and then she immediately questioned the number of times it would have taken for Rachaël to develop such skill within the meld. That thought led to the feeling of jealousy … all the times Shepard had been able to meld with her daughter while Aethyta had been forced to sit on the sidelines and spy on Liara while never, not once, having a chance to speak with her Little Wing until Shepard finally pushed them together on the Citadel.

She felt a chuckle rumble through her breast that was not her own, followed quickly by an amazingly crystal clear thought. [No need to be jealous, Aethyta. I’m her lover and you’re her father. Those two facts will never change and your place in Liara’s life will do nothing but grow over time. Welcome back to the family.]

With that promising reception, Aethyta dived into the memories Shepard offered for her viewing. Aethyta knew Shepard and her girl had been key to winning the war against the Reapers, but was astounded at how the Spectre had finally achieved it in the end. [Synthesis? Shepard was the one responsible for changing us all?]

Aethyta had no time to be angry at having no choice in the matter, as Shepard responded [My choice at the time … and better than being dead] and pressed on. Aethyta lived through Shepard’s terrifying confusion while ‘awakening’ as an organic intelligence within the memory core of the Normandy in the blink of an eye. Even so, the emotion accompanying the memory made it perfectly clear that Rachael’s torture was not so mercifully quick. Shepard’s suffering lasted until Edi … [Normandy has a fucking AI?] … helped her find her way and the crew finally built a holographic interface so Shepard could speak once more with the world around her.

Once Shepard was able to communicate, the overall situation improved immeasurably, particularly once she realized the regard with which she was held by the Reapers. Aethyta honestly believed the idea of utilizing a Reaper … [Žiuk’Durmah? Mechanical psychopaths have names?] … to transport the Normandy home was pure, albeit crazy, genius given the number of years it would have otherwise taken.
On the flipside, Aethyta could tell Rachaél’s rediscovered ability to chat with the crew brought its own set of frustrations. It was obvious she felt as if the crew initially feared the commander’s new form, unwilling to accept that she—a creature of flesh and blood—could somehow be converted into a virtual being. It apparently took a significant period of time to change the minds of those that mattered … all those except Liara, who had been utterly lost without Rachaél and accepted the truth without hesitation, though that led to yet more frustration in being unable to physically touch one another.

The flow of memories suddenly stopped and another thought came through the meld that made Aethyta chuckle. *(And that’s all you get along that vein, Dad. Back to the topic at hand …)* The memories of life on board a ship being carried within an intelligent, living mechanical construct resumed. The realization that there was insufficient food aboard, particularly for Garrus and Tali’Zorah, to feed them all for the expected duration of the journey had led to Žiuk’Durmah requesting that Harbinger initiate a supply run.

With Iringù-Eßizkur docked within Žiuk’Durmah’s cavernous interior and the transfer of fresh supplies complete, a bored Samantha Traynor had an epiphany while staring at the menacing form of the destroyer. After searching in vain for a suitable vessel in which the Shadow Broker could continue to work independently, Iringù-Eßizkur had agreed to become the Broker’s new transport. Traynor and Tali’Zorah had worked tirelessly to outfit the interior spaces of the Reaper with all of Liara’s necessary equipment; the Reaper itself, by now having revealed a feminine personality … *(First, they have names! Now they have gender identity?)* … reconfigured the interior spaces to provide a kitchen area, lounge, sleeping, bath, and restroom facilities.

Aethyta was beginning to wonder if Liara would be traveling alone inside the machine. Rachaél sensed her growing unease and immediately assuaged her fears. *(It was Tali that convinced him … no one wanted to see Liara alone inside a Reaper. Garrus decided to accompany her so she’d have some muscle when they encountered whatever Cerberus had left behind in their deep-space outposts.*) Rachaél paused before offering the next bit of information. *(I could have transferred my essence to the memory core of Iringù-Eßizkur, but it would have been a one-way trip. In the end, I decided to stay with the familiar environment of the Normandy’s computer.)*

The matriarch was getting tired, as was Shepard, so she hurried through the remainder of the journey – contacting Admiral Hackett and Captain Cody, which led to Hackett placing several ships within Harbinger for the trip from Arcturus to the Sol System. The Normandy’s arrival in the cluster and the attempt by Javik to destroy Žiuk’Durmah. Their arrival at the Citadel. Promotions and transfers, including Captain Cody being placed in command of the Normandy.

The hunt for a cloned body for Shepard led to Aethyta’s greatest realization. *(That’s why your appearance is so much more youthful! Damn, Shepard! You’re an old soul in a young body!)*

Rachaél smiled within the meld as she shared just the slightest hint of how overjoyed she and Liara had been to again be able to touch skin-on-skin. *(I’ve never known that level of joy in living, nor that level of ecstasy in joining, as I did that first night we were able to finally be together. Your Little Wing’s love has kept me sane, Aethyta.)*

When they were done, a thoroughly astounded Aethyta eased out of the meld and gently placed Rachaél’s hand down in her lap, both exhausted by the joining. As she leaned back on the couch and sank into the welcoming embrace of the cushions, she closed her eyes and with a touch of awe coloring her voice, whispered, “Holy fucking blue blazes of Athame!”
Honor Satisfied

And I sighed and wept for what could not be – and for all that could have been. — Lang Leav, Lullabies

Grá mo Chroí – Love of my heart (Gaelic)
Ionúin álainn – Beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Irín – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Ebizkur’
Le’wěth – The soft ridges extending from beneath the rear of the scalp, merging into the back of the neck
Mo cheann gealla – My promised one (Gaelic)
Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
Tuinnín – Large, predatory schooling fish found in warm Thessian seas (also Irish for tuna)
Uloth – Asari equivalent of cheese

♦ SUSSKIND STATION, AT LARGE · RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM ♦

Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez was attempting to remain calm, at least outwardly, but his stomach was churning as he waited for a response, either from inside the UT-47, or outside about twenty meters from the shuttle’s stern. Trying again, he said, “Morse! Report!”

A brief crackle of static preceded Sherri Morse’s reply. “I’m here, Commander.” A pause, then more static followed by, “What in the hell was that, Sir?”

“Not important at the moment … stand by.” Cortez huffed a sigh of relief even as he once again attempted to contact Zaeed. “Massani!”

Cortez felt infinitely relieved to hear the gravel-on-slate voice of the old merc. “I’m ’ere, Cortez. Got one ’ell ov a ’eadache. Did we go out drinkin’?”

Apologies, Massani-Zaeed, Morse-Lieutenant. The pulse used to render the waiting batarians unconscious bled past the boundaries within which I attempted to keep it confined. The effects should wear off shortly.

Cortez asked, “Zaeed, can you see the Blue Suns beside the shuttle?”

“Yeah. They’re all down – no movemen’ from any ov ’em.”

Looking behind himself, Cortez caught Corporal Andrews’ eye and said, “Let’s move out – get to the shuttle,” before telling Massani, “We’re on our way. Keep watch on our friends.”

“I’m movin’ to da shuttle,” the old merc replied.

Cortez and his team, along with their two prisoners, arrived at the starboard side of the craft shortly after Zaeed arrived on the port side. Cortez banged on the upper hatch with his fist as he called on his comms, “Morse … it’s Cortez … open the hatch.”

The upper section moved out slightly at the top and lifted clear of the opening as the lower section moved out and slid rearward along the side to reveal a smiling—and greatly relieved—Sherri Morse.
“Glad to see you, Commander.” Stepping out, she added, “Need to check this bird for explosives; I think there may be a package at each or the port thruster pods.”

“Follow Wilder around the stern, Lieutenant. Zaeed should meet you there.”

Corporal Wilder had left Santiago and Dal’Serah in the care of the two heavily armed Marines that had joined them for the trip to the docks; with Morse in trail, he carefully moved around the shuttle’s stern, saying, “Massani! Where are you?”

“Right here, checkin’ deese batarians fer weapons.” Zaeed huffed with impatience. “I’ve never understood why Vido puts up wiv such incompetence. Cheap-assed labor is one thing, but dis …” He raised his hands with palms up to shoulder level in an expression of bewilderment. Looking at Lieutenant Morse, he asked, “Ya find any fireworks on da thruster pods?”

By way of reply, she tossed him a small package. “Found this one wedged in the pivot point for the pod.” Moving past him, she added, “I’m going to check the rest of them.”

Wilder looked from Massani to the unconscious batarians. “What’ll we do with them?”

“Bullet in da back ov der skulls would be my choice – quick an’ clean,” came the reply. “No one’ll mourn deese guys.”

Cortez, after seeing to getting his prisoners loaded and strapped in, had opened the port-side hatch in time to hear Wilder’s question and Zaeed’s solution. With a tired smile, he said, “Not this time, Zaeed. We’ll move ’em away from the shuttle so we don’t cook them when we take off. Prisoners are strapped in … soon as Sherri completes her inspection, we’ll head back to the Normandy.”

By now, Wilder had finished checking Iringù-Eßizkur’s unconscious victims; he said, “This is something we don’t want to leave behind,” as he held up a small device he’d taken from the one batarian wearing tech-armor.

“Hey, be careful with that thing, Corporal. I got two more packages that are probably tied to it electronically.”

Cortez eyed the device as Sherri walked up with the explosive packs she had discovered.

“Make sure it’s inoperable before you place it in the forward storage compartment, Corporal. Lieutenant, do you have any problem bringing those packs along, or should we leave them here?”

“I say we strap one to each of the Suns’ soldiers here before we move ’em,” Morse replied. “They regain consciousness and see their new party decorations, they’ll wonder if one of us is close by with the detonator.”

Cortez nodded. “Do it, then move them away from the shuttle’s blast radius so we can get the hell out of here.”

♦

T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Liara knew her Siame would be quite tired after the time she’d spent in an informational meld with Aethyta; the matriarch was tired as well, but had a number of centuries of experience under her belt, so knew how to pace herself. As Aethyta withdrew from Shepard’s mind and both sank back into the cushions, Liara quickly rose and walked to the main door to the office; she had sent a text from her omnitool when it became apparent the meld was near completion.
Just outside were several covered serving trays featuring smoked fish, a selection of sliced cheeses, breads, vegetables, and beverages. Nodding to the staff members waiting outside, she picked up one of the trays and carried it into Aethyta’s office, where she set it down on a large side table placed for just such a purpose. Once all the trays had been placed, Liara picked up a plate and filled it with the fish and cheeses she knew Rachaél loved to eat. After filling a second plate with similar foods, she took both over to the two people slumped on the couch. “Dad, for you …” she said as she handed a plate to Aethyta and then to her lover “… and Rachaél. Please … Start eating while I pour something to drink.”

Rachaél applied herself to the fish and cheese, attempting to not appear as if she hadn’t eaten in a week. Glancing at the matriarch, she grinned at the sight of the normally dignified asari applying herself to the food on her plate as if she too had been without for a number of days. Liara returned with a glass of flavored, eezo-infused water for each of them, then sat beside her Siame with her own glass.

Aethyta swallowed her mouthful of smoked maanru, then took a sip of water while scrutinizing Shepard with an appraising look. “You were correct, Shepard. I would have seriously doubted nearly everything you went through had you simply told me of it. Seeing all of your memories first-hand, from your decision on the Crucible to your return as a flesh and blood person …” she shrugged her shoulders slightly in a nearly perfect imitation of a human action as she said, “… simply astounding.”

Shepard smiled at the matriarch as she replied, “There were times I felt I’d be unable to retain my sanity.” Turning a loving gaze on her Ionúin álaimn, she added, “If not for Liara, I probably would have completely lost it.”

Aethyta smiled, took another sip of water and said, “It’s getting to be too late for us to continue on – I should think we’ll be having dinner before long.” Looking at Liara, she concluded, “You and I need to meld tomorrow – in the morning, with Shepard as our observer. I know it will be upsetting, probably for both of you, but I need to learn how Nezzie and her entire commando team came to die on Noveria.” Taking notice of the sudden pain in Liara’s expression, she added in a sympathetic voice, “I know she was your mother, Little Wing, and you were on Noveria when she died, but she was the love of my life before she got involved with that Saren bastard.” Aethyta spat the turian’s name out as if were some form of bitter poison. “I never stopped loving her, even after she kicked me out of her life before you were even born. I’ve never been told how she died, and to this day my heart still aches … it’s a pain I don’t believe will ever diminish. You and Shepard brought her and the commandos home afterwards – that cannot have been easy for either of you, but I wasn’t even allowed on the grounds, either here or at the townhome, so you can imagine how very difficult it’s been for me.”

In a pained voice, Liara said, “I am so sorry … until this moment, I have never given any thought to how her death must have affected you.” Glancing at her lover, she added, “I have a great deal of history—from before the Collectors … before Sovereign—that I will need to share with you. Reliving that time will be painful for me, especially that which involves Noveria, but I am more than willing to endure it for you. Just … be prepared for my need to withdraw when the memories become too much to bear.”

The hope and gratitude in Aethyta’s expression was all the confirmation Liara needed to see she had chosen the right path forward with her father. Knowing Aethyta had been tasked by the Matriarchs with keeping Liara under observation because of a connection to Cerberus through Commander Shepard, however tenuous that may have been, Liara was well aware of just how little her father actually knew about the degree to which she had aided her lover during the hunt for Saren, the destruction of Sovereign at the Citadel, and her very own single-minded hunt for the Shadow Broker
following Shepard’s death in the frozen skies over Alchera. The memory meld with Aethyta in the morning would probably last longer than either of them could anticipate.

Rachaél eased herself into the very large bed she would be sharing with Liara for the next fifty-nine evenings. Liara was a few minutes behind her; when she shed her robe and crawled between the sheets, she took up the same position she had adopted early in their relationship aboard the Normandy … lying alongside Shepard’s right side with her right arm bent at the elbow, resting across muscular abs and chest, with legs lying beside Shepard’s and her head nestled into the crook of a very comfortable shoulder.

Rachaél used her right hand to gently massage Liara’s back, being careful—for now—to avoid dipping her fingers into the sensitive le’wĕth. “How are you feeling, Blue?”

“It’s a bit of a shock … coming home and seeing so little damage left behind by the Reapers. It almost feels as if all of what we went through was simply a nightmare.”

Tilting her head to place a kiss on top of Liara’s crests, she replied, “There was much more damage in the cities. The Repositories have been assisting with reconstruction, and don’t forget the amount of time it took for us to return from the outer rim, then find a clone for me to inhabit. I’m sure Aethyta will share that info with you tomorrow.”

Liara snuggled into Rachaél’s side a bit more. “I’m not looking forward to reliving all we went through between you rescuing me on Therum and Sovereign’s destruction at the Citadel … Noveria will be particularly difficult.”

“I understand, Grá mo chroí. I will be there for you so you can take as many breaks as you need. We have lots of time, and I want Aethyta to understand the enormity of what the war has cost you … what it has cost both of us.”

Aethyta and Liara sat together on the comfortable couch in the office, Liara holding her father’s hand as they entered into a memory meld. Aethyta began by showing Liara some of what had led up to her own departure from the T’Soni household, and why it had taken so many decades for her to even tell Liara of her relationship. [You had the best education any asari could ask for, but you were taught nothing about asari parent-child relationships. I was legally prohibited by your mother from telling you of our relationship – under threat of disbondment. Nezzie kicked me out of her life … wouldn’t let me see you after you were born. Even after a hundred years, the edict is still legally binding. The House Regent has the legal authority to unseal the records, but only if Tevos agrees with her actions, and … it’s a process you would need to initiate.]

{Goddess. My mother would have nullified your bond? How could she be so vindictive?}

{It was done out of fear, Liara. Nezzie was afraid my crass language and commando ways of dealing with problems would somehow spoil your childhood … inspire you to follow in my footsteps as a commando. She didn’t want that for you … she wanted you to follow her into governmental service. It always pained her, I think, that you went your own way despite her desires for you. In spite of that, she was proud of you, Liara … so very proud of your accomplishments.}

{I kept in touch with her … we talked at least every month or so, until Saren came along, led her down a darker path … you do realize she was indoctrinated by Sovereign early on – she and all of the commandos were under that machine’s thrall, almost from the time they began travelling with Saren. It was only through her mastery of her own mind that she was able to preserve a small corner that was completely hers – a place into which she retreated when Sovereign compelled her to}
act against her conscience. It was how she broke free—at the end—long enough to give us the information we needed to follow Saren."

Aethyta finally asked the question she had been avoiding, knowing the answer, no matter what it was, would bring her grief. [How did she die, Liara?]

Shepard had been closely watching both asari; their facial expressions were actually a dead giveaway of their mental states within the meld. Liara’s face contorted in an expression of intense grief, to be similarly followed by an anguished look on Aethyta’s face; both had tears seeping from tightly closed eyes. Rachaël could only surmise Liara was sharing memories of Noveria.

[Goddess! It wasn’t me! Once Shepard discovered my mother was in the labs there, she absolutely refused to include me on her ground team – she didn’t want to place me in a position where I’d have to kill my own mother to keep her from killing me. I was left behind at the tram station after the rachni had been dealt with. Rachaël sent for me just before the commandos attacked her squad; by the time I arrived they were all dead, and Mother …] Liara cried out in distress as the memories nearly overwhelmed her.

[… Mother … was dying. She broke free of Sovereign’s control just long enough to tell us …]

Rachaël went to Liara as her eyes fluttered open; Aethyta had withdrawn from her mind as the nearly overwhelming enormity of Liara’s experiences on Noveria were revealed. When Rachaël was sure both asari were aware of her presence, she gently grasped a pair of blue hands, even as Aethyta focused her eyes on the human.

“You performed an exceedingly difficult task, Shepard,” she whispered. “You actually killed Benezia, along with most of her commandos. You kept Liara back so she wouldn’t be involved in their deaths, and for that you will always have my gratitude.” Her voice hitched in barely contained grief as she added, “I truly wish there had been no need to end her life.”

With Rachaël holding her hands, Liara’s anguish finally got the better of her – she rose from the couch to throw her arms around the human with an anguished cry. As Liara wept for the death of her mother and the commandos that had died in her service, Rachaël, holding tightly onto her Siame, turned her head slightly and answered the matriarch’s unvoiced question, her facial expression next to Liara’s crests at once sad and grim. “I killed their bodies, Aethyta … shells of what had once been skilled asari commandos, their minds having long since ceased to be theirs to control; they had become disposable tools to be used by Saren and Sovereign. The only one of the commandos that survived was Shiala Treya, and that only because she had been given …” Shepard spat the word out with all the contempt she could muster, “… by Saren to the Thorian at Zhu’s Hope on Feros. She chose to remain behind when we left … to help the colonists once they were free of the Thorian’s control.” Continuing to hold the still weeping Liara, Shepard gently rubbed her back and whispered “I’m so sorry, Mo cheann geallta,” over and over in her ear.

Aethyta had come to understand the depth of this human’s devotion for her ‘Little Wing’, a thing she would have believed impossible before melding with Shepard. It is almost as if there is a touch of asari blood coursing through her veins, she thought quietly, even though she knew beyond any doubt that Shepard bled red if she were wounded.

zs

♦ SUSSKIND STATION, COMMERCIAL DOCKS · RAHEEL-LEYYA SYSTEM ♦

Zaeed Massani had had just about enough of the ‘… you can’t do that here!’ bullshit from the dock master of the station; he activated his comlink and said, “Irin … lock on ter my signal an’ come pick me up. I wan’ ter get back to da Citadel.”
As Sherri Morse brought the UT-47a to a hover a scant meter above the heavy metal decking and pivoted the craft around to make ready to head out, a massive shape designed to invoke nightmares in those that witnessed it rapidly closed on the open docking area; Iringù-Ebízkur’s kinetic barrier pierced the station’s electronic shield wall, generating an amazingly colorful display of rippling, sparking interference discharges the length of her midnight black body. The dock manager’s protest died in his throat as the Destroyer-class Repository silently tipped her tail up as it came over the platform edge, there to slowly spread and set her four dual-claw tipped legs down on the platform, all well away from where Massani and the dock manager were standing. The near total silence of her landing had been completely masked by the noise from the idling shuttle.

As the salarian stared up at the terrifying visage of Iringù-Ebízkur’s ‘face’, a boarding tube was lowered to the platform a meter from Zaeed’s feet; he had watched in fascination as the tube descended, then looked at Zaeed as if he had just sprouted horns. “You’re really going up in that thing?”

Massani grinned at the salarian and nodded. “I’ll be as safe inside that Repository as if I were ridin’ around in me muvver’s womb.” With that, he stepped into the meter wide opening in the side of the tube and vanished, leaving the dock manager to stare in open mouthed amazement at the tube as it rapidly retracted after a short delay. Inside the UT-47a, Lieutenant Morse applied throttles to the main burners and slowly accelerated away on her trip back to the Normandy.

As Zaeed came to the top of the boarding tube, he was gently pushed out through an opening similar to the one he had entered below; taking the few steps needed to cross the small ‘reception’ compartment and enter the realm of the Shadow Broker, he said, “Okay, Irin … let’s ‘ead fer da relay. I wan’ us ready ter jump as soon as I ‘ave confirmashun from Cody what those miserable Blue Suns bastards are securely locked down in da brig. It’s a three-relay ‘op … you s’pose you can get der Osun, Tasale an’ Imir relays pre-aligned ter give us a straight shot at da Widow System?”

Zaeed felt the telltale touch of vertigo as the construct realigned her internal gravity while configuring herself for FTL flight. “Not possible, Massani-Zaeed.” A tone that Zaeed could only attribute to … amused indulgence … crept into the voice of the old machine as she explained, “Each receiving relay must align with the originating relay in order to establish a space-time corridor. Example: upon our arrival in the Osun system, that relay must realign with the Tasale relay before a space-time corridor can be established between the pair. Once that operation is complete, I can once again travel between the systems.”

“Understood, Irin … just … do da best yew can … and as soon as yew ‘ear from Cody concernin’ dem bloody prisoners, set course and start da trip back.” Grabbing the travel bag brought to him by the landing party, he added, “I’m gonna make use ov der bathing facilities – get cleaned up, change me clothes. I ’ave ter visit a friend in der ’ospital.”

“As you wish, Massani-Zaeed.”

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Matron Lyessa Raptos, the house steward for the estate, stopped in to check on the trio shortly after Liara, Aethyta and Rachael had begun eating lunch. “Aethyta. Just making sure everything is okay. The house has been extremely quiet – more so than I would expect, given your presence here.”
The gravelly chuckle was really all Lyessa needed to hear, but the matriarch took a sip of water before replying, “We’re all doing just fine, Lyessa. Once we’ve replenished spent calories, we’ll be continuing on my path of discovery. These two were responsible … individually and together … for much during the recent war … so much more than has been revealed by those holding positions of power.”

“Then I will return to my duties. Please call for myself or Lyria if you need anything.” The matron bowed slightly towards the threesome before turning and leaving through the main door. As Aethyta returned her attention to her meal, Shepard observed, “It is very quiet here. Is it always so?”

Aethyta glanced at the human as she took a bite of tuinnín, followed by a bite of uloth. Liara answered for her father, saying, “This place was … is … considered a retreat from all the rigors of living in the city. It’s a place to relax … decompress. I always preferred to spend my time home from college here, rather than in Armali.”

Rachaél nodded in agreement as she said, “It’s nice to be in a place that feels secure without the security being obvious. In some ways, it reminds me of the peaceful aspects of my life on Mindoir … before the batarian raids that killed my parents. Does that make sense to either of you?”

Aethyta raised her left brow in response. “I was not aware your parents died on Mindoir, Rachaél. It would seem your deep-seated dislike for batarians was a direct result of their attack, and it has influenced your actions ever since.”

Rachaél nodded, then briefly told of how her biotics had manifested that day. “I was sixteen years old. The things I saw …” A haunted look washed over her face before she could regain control of her emotions. With a small grin, she changed the subject, saying, “We should probably begin again. Are you ready for me to join you and Liara?”

The sun’s angle through the large windows had changed dramatically while the two asari and one human were joined in a three-way memory meld. Aethyta used a newly freed hand – Shepard and Liara were seated on either side of her – to pinch the bridge of her nose between thumb and finger. Letting out a heavy sigh, she looked first at her daughter, then at her daughter’s promised. “Fucking incredible!”

Shepard returned the look with a tired sigh. “It has been an incredible ride, Aethyta. This beautiful maiden chose to fall in love with me – was by my side through the search for Saren, rescued my body from the Blue Suns before they could turn me over to the Shadow Broker, then placed all her faith in a promise by Cerberus that I would live again. I helped her take down the Shadow Broker while fighting the Collectors; she’s been at my side ever since the Reaper invasion …” Rachaél lifted her head slightly to look past Thyta at her Ionúin álaimn before concluding, “… and I love her with every fiber of my being.”

Liara huffed as she stood. “I don’t know about you two, but I really need a snack, or the commandos will be risking their lives while attempting to load their plates. Rachaél? Father?”

Rachaél, glad for Liara’s interruption, stood and said with a small chuckle, “I’ll help you with that. I’m really hungry, and I don’t wish for everyone to think I’m a starving human.”
decking that formed the pedestrian and aircar area, only a short distance from the Hong Kong, still in its berth. A few moments after deploying her boarding tube, Zaeed Massani appeared, clean shaven and dressed in typical civilian attire rather than his normal armor and weapons.

Activating his omnitool, he said, “You sure all me gear’ll be safe inside your structure, Irin?”

The Repository managed to imbue her response with a tone implying a tired acceptance of this human’s insecurities concerning the formerly hostile machine race. What could possibly happen to your … gear … inside, as you would put it, ‘a goddamned bloody Reaper’. I will wait for you here, Massani-Zaeed. No harm will come to your armor or weapons.

Zaeed chuckled nervously to hide his embarrassment. “I apologize, Irin. I’m still tryin’ ter overcome me fear concernin’ our relashunship. See ya soon.” With that, he strolled over to the rental kiosk for pre-programmed air cars in order to travel to Huerta Memorial.

♦ HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, SECURE ALLIANCE WING · CITADEL ♦

After a brief outing to the nearby cafeteria, Sandra Patton had returned to the room she shared with Samantha Traynor, where she gratefully slid her still healing legs under the covers and attempted to get comfortable in a bed that was apparently designed for anything but comfort. Despite this, she was nearly asleep when a soft rap of knuckles on the door woke her. Looking towards the door as it swung inwards, Patton was at first dumbfounded, then overjoyed beyond belief at the sight of Zaeed Massani, a small floral bouquet in one hand, coming into her room.

Without thinking, she swung her legs out to stand and greet him; her knees and shins protested the sudden weight; she would have went down in an inglorious heap had not Massani rushed up to her, grabbing her under an arm with a hand on her back. As he held her close, she gasped, “Damn, Zaeed. I wasn’t expecting to see you for another day, at least.”

As for Massani, he was quickly and uncomfortably aware the woman he was holding against his body was nearly nude, if the open back of her hospital attire was any guide. He responded to her statement by replying, “I can leave an’ come back tomorrow, if dat’s yer wish.” He walked her backwards to the edge of her bed, expecting her to sit.

For Patton, having Massani holding her tightly had her happy beyond belief. When she stopped with the backs of her thighs against the mattress, he started to push away from her; before he could make any real progress, Sandra unexpectedly pressed her lips to his, causing the old merc to draw back in shocked surprise.

As he drew back, she whispered, “Don’t you dare leave me, Zaeed Massani.” Patton didn’t know why, but holding onto Zaeed as she was had ignited a small fire within her. She tilted her head as she attempted to reclose the slight distance between them, only to be disappointed by Massani dodging her lips just enough so her kiss landed on his scarred right cheek.

In an attempt to cover his embarrassment, he said, “Damn … I wasn’t gone that long, was I, Luv? Here, let me ’elp yew up …” He lifted slightly to help her back onto the bed, then reapplied her covers as she slid her legs back around. Pulling up a chair, he grabbed a hand and sat beside her. “I ’eard yew was ’urt pret’y bad in that esplosion.”

Patton was a bit at a loss at Zaeed’s actions; after their dinner together before the assault on the Blue Suns’ building, she had thought he had some feelings for her. Was I wrong about how he felt? she thought as she answered his question, “Traynor and I both, Zaeed. What about you? You catch that bastard Dal’Serah and his boss? All of this …” she waved her other hand down her torso and legs,
“… pain will have been for nothing if you didn’t catch them.”

“Oh, I got ’em alright. Cortez transported ’em from da station back ter da Normandy – they should be ’itting the docks in a’ hour or two.”

She nodded, then brought the hand holding hers up to her lips. “I’ve missed you terribly, Zaeed. I was really afraid you’d walk into a damned trap like we did and wind up dead, and I didn’t want …” Patton looked down for a few moments as she struggled to keep her emotions in check. With moisture-glazed eyes, she returned her gaze to Zaeed and quietly continued. “I didn’t want you to … die … without knowing how much you mean to me, Zaeed. Had time to think, ya know … been giving a lot of thought to … us …” Covering her face with her free hand, she blurted out, “You must think me a silly dolt, Zaeed. We hardly know each other, and here I am with what must seem like a mad, school girl crush on an old mercenary.”

Zaeed sighed. “Listen, Luv. I like you … a lot, an’ dammit, like is an’ all weak a word fer what I feel fer you, but I don’t wan’ yew ter think I’m in love wiv you, Master Guns. I ain’t ’eld nothin’ close ter me but ’ate an’ revenge for over two decades … truf is, I don’t believe I’m capable ov lovin’ any more … least ways, not da kind ov love yew desire … an’ deserve.”

Seeing the expression of embarrassed hurt on her face, he hurried to soothe her feelings. “I’m sorry, Sandra, I truly am. There are few enuff people in da galaxy what give a good goddamned about ol’ Zaeed Massani … I’d really ’ate it if I could no longer coun’ yew as one ov those few.” He hung his head and gazed at the floor, feeling embarrassment and shame in equal amounts as he waited for her reaction.

Patton’s embarrassment had turned to regret for the man’s apparent inability to be in a loving relationship. Thinking about what he had just said, she again kissed the gnarled knuckles of the hand she was holding before quietly saying, “I’m sorry as well, Zaeed … for putting you on the spot. I guess it was foolish of me to think I could be someone special to you. I really like you, and yes, it hurts that you cannot feel love for me … and I feel really bad that you cannot find it within yourself to love … anyone. That’s just … really sad, but I understand, I think. And I certainly don’t hate you, much as you think you deserve my hate.” Pausing to carefully choose her words, she concluded, “Your single-minded focus for over two decades has been killing Vido Santiago. I hope that once he’s in an Alliance lock-up, you’ll rest easier at night … perhaps learn what it means to live for yourself again. And if there’s any way I can help you towards that goal, I’ll be here for you, Zaeed. I won’t wait for you, but I’ll not turn my back on you either.” Once again she gently kissed the knuckles of the hand she was holding before placing it on the bed beside her and letting it go.

Zaeed was speechless … he tried to speak several times with no success before finally finding the words to tell her, “Thank you, Luv. I know what a difficult old bastard I am ter be around, an’ it flatters me ter no end what you ain’t gonna turn your back ter me.” He stood up, placed a surprisingly gentle hand on her shoulder before bending down to place a kiss on her forehead. “I’m gonna go back ter da docks, Luv … ’ave ter retrieve me gear from Irin, then go meet Cody on da Normandy when it arrives.” Looking down at her, he was surprised to realize just how much he really liked this woman. With a sad smile, he said, “I’ll see ya soon, Luv.”

Without waiting for an answer, Zaeed turned and left Patton’s room, nearly bowling Specialist Traynor over as he went through the doorway. Sammy barely had time to say ’hello’ before Massani sidestepped her and continued down the passageway towards the exit. Traynor walked up to Patton’s bed to discover her friend quietly weeping, accompanied by tears leaking from under tightly closed eyelids and with a hand across her mouth and nose.

“What the hell, Sandee? Why the tears?”
Sandra’s voice hitched as she tried to explain how Zaeed had broken her heart. “I damn near told him I loved him, Sammy. At least he let me down before I completely bared my soul to him.” Patton gradually regained control over her emotions as Sammy sat in the chair so recently vacated by Massani.

“Oh Sandee, I’m so sorry. I take it he doesn’t feel the same way about you?”

Patton was able to keep a rein on her emotions as she spoke of Zaeed’s visit. “He said it’s not me … that he’s incapable of loving anyone. Do you suppose that’s a result of being shot in the head by Vido all those years ago?”

Spotting the forgotten bouquet on the table beside the bed, Traynor thought about the old merc as she found a container in which to place it. Adding water from the faucet in the bathroom sink, she set the flowers on the table beside Patton’s bed, finally giving voice to her thoughts as she did so. “That’s as good a reason as anything I can think of, Sandee. It’s certainly not you …” *I mean, look at you!* she thought. *I’d make a run at you myself if I weren’t committed to Xiulán."

“That’s what Zaeed told me,” she sniffled. “Dammit! I really like him, Sammy. Must be that ‘bad boy’ thing … always been a sucker for bad boys, and Zaeed is certainly the epitome of a real bad boy.”

“Well, if he’s back from his trip to the outer rim, he must have nabbed Dal’Serah and Santiago.”

“That he did,” came the quiet answer. “I don’t think he would have returned empty-handed, not after what the pursuit of Dal’Serah cost me … and you.”

“That’s good. I can’t wait to hear the whole story from one of the Marines on board.”

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**T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA**

Matriarch Aethyta kneeled silently in the garden among the many flower blossoms in various shades of yellow, with the mid-afternoon late summer sun peeking in through gaps in the foliage of the many trees and shrubs that surrounded this small corner of the gardens that comprised the rear yard of the T’Soni country estate. She was facing a one-meter high bronze casting, set in the shape of a flaming torch, that was the centerpiece of a memorial dedicated to Liara’s mother and Aethyta’s bondmate, Matriarch Benezia T’Soni.

*By the Goddess, Nezzie,* came the silent thought. Placing her fingertips on the inscription at the pillar’s base, she continued to contemplate the past. *It has been a full five years, and yet the passage of that time seems like only an instant to me.* Tears came suddenly to her eyes, causing her to cover her mouth to prevent a cry of grief. *Dammit Nezzie, I am so sorry for all the pain I caused you while you were alive. I know I apologized … I know we talked, after my departure, but until now, I never knew how …*

The sound of a twig snapping behind her brought her instantly to her feet to turn and confront a perceived threat. Hands glowing blue with biotic power, it took a moment for her to recognize the human that had shared the information concerning Benezia’s death on the frozen world of Noveria. “Shepard. I wasn’t expecting you out here. What do …”

The human had her hands up, palms outward in a display of peaceful intent. “I’m sorry, Thyta. Didn’t mean to startle you … thought I’d join you … perhaps share in the pain it appears you are suffering.”
The matriarch huffed, the sound a mixture of sadness and embarrassment; she started to send Shepard away, but thought better of it and held out a hand in welcome. “I was just thinking back to before Liara was born … when Nezzie and I were still close, our lives together stretching out before us as a promise.” She clasped Shepard’s hand as she turned back towards the memorial. “You arranged for this?” she asked, motioning towards the bronze torch.

“It seemed like the least I could do … for Liara. At the time, I was unaware of your existence, Thyta … this memorial is as much for you now as it was, and is, for Liara.”

Aethyta’s smile didn’t quite reach her eyes as she said, “Thank you, Rachaél. Of the many humans I’ve encountered during my lifetime, you are the most extraordinary person I’ve ever met.” She slowly eased herself down to her knees, an action that Shepard mirrored beside her. “Goddess be damned. Watching Nezzie’s last moments through your eyes … through Liara’s eyes … how terrible that must have been … for both of you.”

“The commandos were unknown to me, but Benezia … I would have given anything to save her life, Aethyta. She was not the enemy, nor the commandos … Sovereign was controlling them, even from afar.” Rachaél tightened her grip on Aethyta’s hand as she continued in a tone that conveyed infinite sadness. “In the end, there were no other options open to me. She would have killed all of us, Liara included, simply because the Reaper demanded it.”

Aethyta caressed the inscription at the base of the pillar. “Were these your words, or Liara’s?”

Shepard sighed as she closed her eyes and replied, “Liara’s. It seemed appropriate to include them here.”

Aethyta read the inscription aloud. “With her last breath, she fought to bring light to the darkness.” With a heavy sigh, Aethyta rose to stand once more, with Shepard retaking her own feet as well. “I believe she is still bringing light, Shepard.” With that, the matriarch reached around to give the Spectre a hug. “Thank you for showing me your past, Rachaél. You have endured trauma that would have broken a lesser mind. You are an excellent match for my Little Wing.” With that, Aethyta released her hold on the human, smiled, and began walking back to the house.

A/N: This chapter depicts a lot of the same elements of Asari culture and life on Thessia as that envisioned by Desert Sunrise, also on this site with multiple stories. Anything written in this chapter that seems to be ‘lifting’ parts of DS’s stories is done with the permission of my coauthor … our two galaxies, although different in many respects, do share similarities regarding the Asari. Thank you, Desert Sunrise, for providing inspiration and guidance for my own vision of Thessian life.
A Replacement For The Shadow Broker

‘I had my first dream about you last night.’ ‘Really?’ She smiles. ‘What was it about?’ ‘I don’t remember exactly but the whole time I was dreaming, I knew you were mine.’ — Lang Leav, Love & Misadventure

Amantía – Lover (Thessian)
Grá mo Chroí – Love of my heart (Gaelic)
Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Ionnián álainn – Beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Irín – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’
Leannán – Lover (Irish/Gaelic)
Le’wĕth – The soft ridges extending from beneath the rear of the scalp, merging into the back of the neck
Mo cheann geallta – My promised one (Gaelic)
Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)
Tuinnín – Large, predatory schooling fish found in warm Thessian seas (also Irish for tuna)
Uloth – Asari equivalent of cheese

♦ ALLIANCE DOCKS · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Zaeed Massani’s thoughts were chaotic as he left Huerta Memorial Hospital to walk back to the Alliance docks. A recovering Sandra Patton had all but thrown herself at him as he entered her room for a short visit. I broke dat girl’s ‘eart, he mused. Never would ’ave dreamed she wan’ed there ter be … an us … she can do so much be’er than dis alcoholic old mercenary. Criminy! I’m old enuff ter be ’er damned father … maybe even ’er grandfather!’ His thoughts continued on in the same vein as he passed through a security checkpoint to gain access to the Alliance docks. After retrieving his armor and weapons from within Iringù-Eßizkur, he intended to go to the berth assigned to the Normandy, which he expected to arrive within the hour.

His paced slowed to some extent as he approached the destroyer-class Reaper. He had been less than enthusiastic about traveling inside Iringù-Eßizkur, as it … she … referred to herself. The massive construct—as large as an Alliance frigate, yet faster, deadlier, and self-aware—had enabled him to not only follow Solem Dal’Serah as he attempted to escape from an assault on the Blue Suns’ Citadel headquarters, but had taken him to the station in the Raheel-Leyya system where Vido Santiago had been living in relative obscurity while continuing to direct Blue Suns’ operations.

Zaeed grinned in satisfaction as he paused ten meters from one of the creature’s claw-footed legs. “Hey Irin,” he shouted up at the metal underside.

You do not have to give voice to my name so loudly, Massani-Zaeed. As close as you are standing, a whisper would suffice. What may I do for you?

Zaeed shook his head slightly; speaking in a normal conversational volume, he asked, “Kin I come in ter get da rest ov me gear?”

Of course. Deploying boarding conduit. Her last word was accompanied by the nearly
imperceptible whisper of hidden machinery from above. Zaeed looked up in time to see the semi-
translucent cylinder descending from the Repository’s main body; the tube touched the decking less
than a meter from where he was standing, its opening beckoning him to enter. With a heavy sigh,
Zaeed stepped into the boarding device, to be rendered relatively weightless as he was wafted
upwards into the old machine’s interior compartments.

Once inside the habitation area, he quickly armored up, thinking it would be simpler to wear than to
carry. After docking his rifles to the hard points on his backplate, he docked his heavy pistol to its
hard point on his hip, grabbed his shoulder bag and turned to leave.

Before he could reenter the null gravity tube to descend to the dock surface below, Iringù-Eßizkur,
speaking through the comm terminal, asked, »Massani-Zaeed. Can you tell me how Traynor-
Specialist and Patton-Master Gunnery Sergeant are progressing? Are they healing from injuries
sustained in the assault on the Blue Suns base?«

Massani walked back towards the area that held all of the equipment Traynor had used to discover
what they needed to know about the headquarters building and Dal’Serah’s escape route. The
flashing of the comms device closest to the entry drew his attention. “Both ov ‘em seem ter be ’ealing quite well, Irin … Sandra is still a bi’ weak on ’er legs, but she should be fine. Traynor may
be released in a few more days, but I doubt either’ll be a ’undred percen’ fer several more weeks.”

»Would it be acceptable for me to send a message to each of them?«

“I don’t see what ’arm it could do, Irin. Why do you ask?”

The tone of Iringù-Eßizkur’s feminine ‘voice’, infused as it was with musical undertones, held a
slight tinge of embarrassed regret. »It is a strange … feeling, Massani-Zaeed. My purpose … the
reason I exist … has been changed by my interactions with T’Soni-Liara, Vakarian-Garrus … and
now, Traynor-Specialist. As T’Soni-Liara and Vakarian-Garrus have parted company to return to
their homeworlds, I currently am without purpose. I need to learn if my services will be required in
the near future.«

“Send a message ter Captain Cody on da Normandy, Irin. It was ’im what gave Traynor leave ter
assist us … an’ she could only do that by employin’ all da fancy gear in dis compartment. He may
be able ter answer your quesshuns.”

»Thank you, Massani-Zaeed. I will do as you suggest.«

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Rachaël Shepard cracked one eyelid open just enough to confirm to herself that she wasn’t dreaming
– that she really was lying in the middle of a large bed with the love of her life stretched out along
her right side, asleep with her head tucked into Rachaël’s shoulder, an arm lying across her midriff,
one blue leg over both of her own. She tipped her head slightly in order to place her lips on the
asari’s forehead; Liara unexpectedly responded with a quiet sigh before lightly caressing Shepard’s
mind. [Good morning, Siame. How did you sleep?]

[It was wonderful, Blue. Did you remain melded with me the entire night? I don’t remember you
leaving my mind, and all my dreams were of you – and our future together.]

[I … left you just as you lost conscious thought to sleep, my love. I was afraid you might wake up …
have to get out of bed. I only just returned to your mind as I sensed that you were waking up. And
now …] Liara gently withdrew her thoughts from Rachaël’s mind as she moved her leg and arm.
“… I really have to relieve myself, darling. I won’t be but a few moments.”

Before Liara could move, Rachaël gently placed her fingers on a soft cheek to ensure her aim was true before placing her lips on those of her lover. Liara gave the commander a radiant smile as she broke the kiss and moved to the edge of the bed. Turning back to look at her human, she was taken by the devotion shining in the woman’s green eyes. “I thank the Goddess every day I’m alive for sending you to find me, Rachaël.” Moisture gathered in the brilliant blue eyes as she continued, “I am doubly blessed to have you back physically after your ordeal in the Normandy’s computer.”

“No more blessed than I am, Ionúin álainn. I would have surely been lost without your steady companionship on the Normandy.” Rachaël watched with avid interest as the nude asari walked to the bathroom; as the door closed behind her blue goddess, she thought, I have got to be the luckiest person alive to have earned her love and devotion.

♦

**HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, SECURE ALLIANCE WING · THE CITADEL**

Specialist Samantha Traynor was walking through the passageways in this wing of the hospital, mainly because she needed the exercise, but also because she was nearly bored out of her mind at not having something … anything … to do. She expected Dr Chakwas to release her to light duty by the end of this day or the morning of the next; maybe once she could reboard the Normandy she could start feeling … useful … again.

She had begun her third circuit since leaving Sandra Patton in their shared room. That Zaeed Massani had broken the Master Gunnery Sergeant’s heart was painfully obvious to Sammy – the anguished expression on Patton’s face was quite similar to the expression she’d witnessed on Xiülán’s face the one time Traynor had let her simmering anger at bullshit Alliance policy dictate her treatment of her Inamorata for seeming to take their side against her.

Damn, she thought. That was just before the Reaper invasion. I spent the entire war not knowing which ship she was assigned to—the Tokyo or the Hong Kong—or even if either ship was still in operation. Either of us could have died without having had a chance to say ‘I love you’ one more time. Thoughts of Xiülán were still tumbling about in her mind when her omnitool chimed to indicate an incoming message; upon checking the message header, she was a bit surprised to see it was from Iringù-EBızkur. Smiling at the irony of getting a message from one of the machines she had just been thinking about, she moved to an alcove with views of the station beyond, there to sit on a bench and open the message.

**TO:** TRAYNOR-SPECIALIST

**COPY:** CODY-CAPTAIN, SSV NORMANDY FRIGATE

**FROM:** IRINGÙ-EBİZKUR

Massani-Zaeed informs me that you, along with Patton-Master Gunnery Sergeant, are healing from injuries received during the recent intrusion of the Blue Suns compound in Ward-Delta. This construct would be grateful to be informed of your plans concerning future requirements concerning your need for transportation in pursuit of your goals.

This construct awaits your reply.

Sammy reread the message twice before archiving it. What the ‘ell do I do? she thought. I’m still a few days away from being released to light-duty. Remembering the message header had copied Captain Cody, she acknowledged receiving the message, asked Iringù-EBızkur to stand by for a
reply, then rose and walked straight back to the room she shared with Sandra Patton. She needed to find out what Captain Cody might be planning for her once she was discharged from the hospital, but felt the need to make the call from the relative privacy of her room.

♦ SSV NORMANDY · ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

Captain Bill Cody had been busy all afternoon; after overseeing the transfer of Vido Santiago and Solem Dal’Serah from the Normandy’s brig to Alliance military custody immediately after docking operations were complete, he had met briefly with Zaeed Massani before the old merc had packed up the rest of his kit, as he called it. Massani was taking his leave of the Normandy, having completed the task the Alliance had asked of him. While he hadn’t been able to beat Vido to death like he wanted, the fact that the smug bastard was locked up was a fringe benefit to go along with his payment.

When Cody had asked where he intended to go next, Massani replied cryptically, “Something’ll turn up. Meantime, I’ll be stayin’ in Delta, at least ’til Patton gets out ov ’ospital. After that …” he shrugged his shoulders, turned and walked down the ramp.

Cody was leaning back in his chair, legs crossed and booted heels on the corner of his desk as he sipped a bit of coffee from his mug; he shifted his shoulders and rolled his head about in an attempt to ease the stress that had been building as he reviewed and approved reports from his department heads. He had noted the receipt of a message from Iringù-Ebijzur, but hadn’t quite gotten around to reading it when his desktop comms unit trilled a request from one of his crewmen on the Citadel. With a heavy sigh, he placed his feet on the floor as he set his mug down on the desk. Squaring himself away in his chair, he keyed the unit on and said, “Cody here,” quickly schooling his expression as he recognized the person calling him. “Specialist Traynor. How are you doing?”

Sammy grinned at her captain as she answered, “Getting better every day, Cap’n. Sorry to have missed all the fun at Susskind Station.” Her tone of voice hinted at a bit of snarkiness as she added, “I haven’t seen the official report, but I’d just bet the Blue Suns didn’t willingly suffer the arrest of their bosses.”

Cody chuckled slightly as he responded with, “No … No, they didn’t.” Turning to the business at hand, he said, “I’m pretty certain this isn’t a social call, so … what can I do for you, Chief Petty Officer?”

Traynor’s grin evaporated; quietly clearing her throat, she replied, “Sir, I received a note from Iringù-Ebijzur – it was sent to you as well. Have you had a chance to look at it?”

“No I haven’t, Specialist. Is it important?”

“Sir, Iringù-Ebijzur is requesting an update on my plans – our plans – for the future use of her services.” Sammy looked down for several moments, contemplating what she needed to say. Looking up again, she continued, “I don’t want to speak about this on an unsecured link, Sir, and since I cannot leave here until I’m cleared for light-duty by Dr Chakwas, would it be possible for you meet with me here at Huerta?”

Cody didn’t care to think about the implications of Traynor’s hesitancy concerning the security of the Normandy’s communications systems; but held his thoughts as he studied his schedule. After several moments, he looked back at the screen and replied, “Specialist, I’ll be over to see you tonight – between 1930 and 2000. That’ll give both of us time to have dinner. You might inform Master Guns Patton that I’ll speak with her as well while I’m there.”
The image of Sammy’s face in the monitor picked up a small smile. “Would you care to have dinner with me here, Sir? The food is as good as anything we have on the ship.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, Specialist.” Cody nodded as he continued, “It’ll be good to have dinner ashore, even if it’s in a hospital cafeteria.”

Sammy’s smile grew bigger as she replied, “Thank you, Sir ... I appreciate you taking the time. I’ll be sure to tell Sandee you’re coming by.”

Saying, “See you soon, Specialist,” Cody terminated the connection; sitting back in his chair, he finished drinking what was now only lukewarm coffee, set the mug down and returned to the ship status reports he had to finish before he could think of going anywhere. Not for the first time he wished he had someone of Yuán Xiùlán’s caliber to take over the drudgery of reading and approving the many department reports that came across his desk each day. Ah, what do you have to complain about, he thought as he worked his way through the engineering report. With the war done, it isn’t like you have much else to do these days. With a sigh, he thumb-stamped the datapad, moved it over to the ‘DONE’ side of his desk and picked up the personnel readiness report.

♦ CITY OF SERRICE, AT LARGE · THESSIA, ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Rachaél Shepard looked about with great interest – this was her first visit to the university city of Serrice. She had traveled here with her Inamorata on the pretense of doing some sightseeing; unknown to Liara, Rachaél had wanted to come here for a reason that had little to do with seeing the sights.

She had still been part of the Normandy’s server on the day that Traynor, Tali’Zorah and then-Lieutenant Cortez had returned from an ultimately successful effort to save the Repository Žiuk’Durmah from being blown apart by a vindictive Javik. Late that evening, she had been visited by Traynor and Tali, along with Miranda Lawson, EDI and Yuán Xiùlán.

Shepard had noticed—and commented on—the beautiful shark-tooth bracelet gracing Xiùlán’s right wrist; she had learned it was a gift from Maracela T’Rhyn, an aide to Minister of Antiquities Matriarch Elesia. Upon speaking with Sammy about the unique piece of jewelry, she had been told of a small, high-end jewelry store owned by Mara and her sister Farnia, T’Rhyn’s Jewelry, near the university and hospital in Serrice.

The Reapers had done a fair job of destroying the city during their assault on the planet; the city of Serrice had fared somewhat better than Armali, but there were still many reminders of their assault. The hospital Xiùlán spoke of was rubble, the once beautiful park now a barren field filled with craters and downed trees; the university buildings had suffered their share of damage as well. Repairs and reconstruction were underway, but Shepard could see that, as in Armali, many months would pass before the city of Serrice would be back to some semblance of normal.

Remarkably, the row of shops described in great detail by Sammy were still standing, and Shepard was pleasantly surprised to find the jewelry store, along with all the adjacent shops, had survived the Reaper assault with little apparent damage.

Liara’s mouth fell open when Shepard paused to inspect the items on display behind the rather large window adjacent to the entry. “Rachaél?” Knowing the answer to the question before she gave voice to it, she asked anyway. “Why are we stopping here?” Rachaél smiled as she glanced at her Siame. “I would think my purpose in having you accompany me here would be quite obvious to an information broker of your stature.” Among the many beautiful pieces on display behind the front window were a number of bonding bracelets, all fashioned from various rare metals. Some were
simply plain, brilliantly polished platinum or silver cuffs; several even appeared to be wrought in gold, with a few of those featuring several rare gems set into a wider portion of the bands.

Turning to face Liara, she grasped both of her hands and gently brought their foreheads together. “You already know I intend to spend the rest of my life with you, Grá mo Chroí, and even though I may be ignorant of everything required for an asari bonding, I have considered you my bondmate in all things but the exchange of bracelets – ever since our time together on the SR1.”

The devotion shining in brilliant blue eyes brought a lump to Rachaél’s throat as Liara whispered, “Rachael. I had almost not dared to hope that one day we would be standing in front of a shop such as this.”

With a smile for the asari holding her hands, Rachaél replied, “I sort of dreaded shopping in Armali, Liara, on account of all the attention we would draw. That’s why I brought you here today … so we can shop free of distractions. I want us to choose a pair of bracelets that will signify to the entire galaxy the depth of our devotion to each other.” Releasing one hand, Rachaél turned and gently led Liara through the entryway into the shop.

They were met just inside the door by a modestly dressed asari matron. “Welcome to my shop,” she said warmly. “My name is Farnia T’Rhyn.” After glancing at Shepard in an inquisitive manner, she focused on Liara to inquire, “What may I do for you today?”

Liara looked to her Siame, who responded with, “I learned of you and your shop from a human … a young woman that visited Serrice before the Reaper War; she told me the graciousness demonstrated by the sisters T’Rhyn was exceeded only by their generosity. I wanted to meet you so I could see your shop for myself.”

T’Rhyn’s eyes went wide in surprise as she placed a hand across her mouth. Shifting her attention from Rachaél’s face to Liara’s and back again, she managed to squeak out a reply. “You’re only the second human female to set foot in my shop. The first human I ever met was Samantha Traynor … long before the Reaper invasion. She is …” Farnia squeezed her eyes shut for a moment as she took a deep breath. Opening her eyes once more, she continued, “… even after so much destruction, she still lives? And what of her Amantia … I don’t quite remember her name, but she was in the hospital for a time.”

Shepard smiled at the happy thought of being able to pass on good news. “Traynor was a crewman on my vessel during the war and her Amantia—Yuán Xiùlán is her name—is an officer on the Alliance frigate Hong Kong, and yes, both are still very much alive and in good health, Ms T’Rhyn.”

Eyes glassing over with wetness caused Farnia to blink rapidly in an effort to keep the sudden accumulation of moisture from cascading down her cheeks. “Then they have been blessed by the Goddess … so many did not survive the Reapers’ attacks.” Realization dawned in Farnia’s mind as the words my vessel registered; her surprise quickly gave way to a sense of awe. Looking intently at Rachaél, she whispered in a near reverent tone, “You must be Commander Shepard of the Normandy.” Taking a second, closer look at Liara, she murmured, “Lady Liara T’Soni … it must be!”

Farnia spread her arms to the side and bowed; standing upright again, she offered her hands in the traditional waist-high, palms-up show of greeting and respect; Liara answered by taking a step forward to gently place her hands on those of Farnia. “I am happy to make your acquaintance, Ms T’Rhyn.”

Taking a step back, she shyly sought the near hand of her Siame as she continued, “And I know my request will probably be ignored, but please … call me Liara. Lady T’Soni is …” voice hitching as
she thought of her mother, she managed to continue with, “... was ... my mother.” A gentle squeeze from the hand holding hers conveyed more support than anything Rachael could have said, and Liara smiled sadly as she gazed into the calm eyes of her Siame.

Farnia had heard of Benezia T'Soni’s death on the icy planet of Noveria; although she did not know the details of her tragic demise, she could see the mental anguish the mention of her mother brought the young maiden. “I apologize for my insensitivity concerning your loss, Lady ... Liara. It was not my intention to upset you.”

With a forced smile, Liara replied, “Apology accepted, Ms T’Rhyn. There is no way you could have anticipated my reaction.” Looking to Shepard, she said, “Shall we see what is available?”

♦  HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, MAIN ENTRANCE · THE CITADEL  ♦

Captain Bill Cody had spent the afternoon doing research on Samantha Traynor’s background before her posting to Vancouver; he had been surprised to learn her position on the Normandy had been an unfortunate case of being in the wrong place at the worst possible time. That she had grown into her position ... her new job on the ship, after being an R&D, design and installation tech on Arcturus and on Earth, spoke to her adaptability to new situations. Reading a few of the reports concerning her interactions with various crew members on the Normandy's return trip from the edge of the galaxy had been a revelation – under the right conditions, the woman was a highly efficient killer, with her hands and with blades. That she was also highly proficient with long guns came as no surprise; what did surprise him was how well she had kept to the dictates of an NDA, ever since having to agree to one at the termination of the Ø7 program.

Cody had also researched Traynor’s former companion for her clandestine missions; not Yuán Xiülán—that was a given—Traynor’s other companion had been Operations Chief ... or more correctly, former Operations Chief ... Griffen Buchanan. Buchanan had survived the Reaper War, but had been injured during the all-out, final defense on Earth. The Alliance had patched him up, but he was never able to regain his former physical prowess. Rather than take a desk job in some dead-end back-water colony, he had asked for, and received, an honorable discharge for medical reasons.

Cody didn’t know where Buchanan was or what he was doing – his disability payments were deposited into a blind account, and discovering anything further was well above Cody’s paygrade. He did know someone that could discover the information – a woman he was going to meet for dinner.

As he walked towards the main entrance to Huerta Memorial, a tall figure separated from the shadows and slowly approached. Damn it, he thought. Looks like I’ll have to explain my personal meeting with Traynor to Xiülán.

Yuán Xiülán stopped in front of Cody and stuck out her hand. “Bill? I understand you’re going to have dinner with my Inamorata. Care to tell me why I wasn’t invited?”

Cody held his breath as the Chinese woman took his hand; surprised at the gentleness of her grip as she pumped his hand once, he glanced at the datapad he was carrying before looking her in the eye. “I believed it would be simpler to meet with Traynor one-on-one, Xiülán ... and ... I am her captain. I want to see how she’s doing – how she’s recovering from her injuries.” With a cheeky grin, Cody concluded with, “You’re more than welcome to join me ... er, us. I believe Master Guns Patton might be there too.”

“Thank you, but I just spent an hour with her, and truthfully?” Xiülán couldn’t stop a snarky grin from lighting up her face. “I’ve eaten all the hospital cuisine I care to, and I need to return to my
ship. Perhaps I need to invite you to dinner, at a real restaurant, off the ship and away from the docks."

Cody released the hand he’d been holding as he replied, “That’s an invite I would certainly accept, Xiùlán. You choose the place and let me know … soon, okay? You and I are long overdue for a bit of quiet conversation, away from …” raising his free hand over his head to indicate the hospital and Alliance controlled docks, “ … all of this insanity.” Mirroring the grin on Xiùlán’s face, he added, “You’re buying, right?”

“Wouldn’t think of asking you out to dinner if I intended to stick you with the check.” Xiùlán’s expression was completely neutral as she said, “I’ll be talking to you tomorrow.”

♦ SECURE ALLIANCE WING ♦

Samantha Traynor entered the hospital cafeteria and looked around at the people already seated at the tables scattered around the large space. Disappointed at not spotting the person she had come to see, she walked over to the food selection area, grabbed a tray and utensils and went down the line. Choosing asari style cuisine over the rather bland offerings made for humans, she carried her dinner to a table in the back corner of the room, sat down and, rather than wait for Cody to arrive, began eating.

She had made a good dent in the meal on her plate when she looked up in response to a question voiced by a person approaching her table. “You always sit with your back to the wall, Chief Petty Officer?"

Grinning at the question, she waved the man towards the chair across from her. “Old habits die hard, Captain. It’s good to see you.”

Setting utensils, plate and bowl on the table, Cody deposited his tray on a close by receptacle before taking a seat. Sipping water from a glass, he took a bite of fresh greens from his salad bowl and chewed quietly as he studied Sammy’s face. Clearing his throat, he said, “No ranks, Samantha. Call me Cody … deal?”

Traynor returned his gaze for a moment before responding, “If that is your desire, Sir. Are we going to discuss what the future holds for Iringù-Eßizkur?”

“That’s my main reason for meeting with you, Samantha. You received the message from that Repository, same as I did.” Cody sipped from his glass as he thought about what he needed to ask. “I’m here to speak with you regarding a possibly lucrative assignment.”

Sammy had an idea what she was going to be asked to do, but waited for Cody to say it. “I’m listening, Sir.”

For a moment, Bill frowned inwardly at the formal address, but decided she just wasn’t going to use his name … yet. “Traynor, I’ve studied your record – the version that isn’t redacted. You have an extremely impressive résumé for a simple comms tech, and the work you did with Massani and Patton was exemplary.” Finishing his water, he concluded by asking, “Have you given any thought to just how valuable you could be to the Alliance if you agreed to work on Iringù-Eßizkur as an information broker?”

Traynor sat back in stunned silence. Thinking back on all the bullshit perpetrated on her by the Systems Alliance since her graduation from the Ø7 program, she responded with a curt, “No, I haven’t.” Tilting her head slightly, she continued with, “Why in hell would you think I would work
to give the Alliance that kind of information … after I identified a terrorist and they let him blow up a ship anyway, killing all those innocent people? After our councilor and some of the upper brass turned out to be Cerberus operatives?” Traynor shook her head in distaste. “Pardon me saying so, Sir, and don’t take it personally, but I wouldn’t trust the Alliance with a fulltime resource such as Iiringù-Elbizkur as far as I could spit. She’s much too important to be just an Alliance resource.”

Cody nodded as if he’d expected a negative reply. “Understandable, given all the crap you’ve endured over the years. I wouldn’t expect you to agree to the offer at all, except …”

She quietly interrupted him, the frustrations of suffering through months and years of perceived mistreatment by the bureaucracy finally boiling over. “Enough!” she hissed. “I don’t think you have any understanding at all of everything I’ve been forced to deal with since the Ø7 program was yanked out from under me. My official service record is so bloody redacted I’m surprised anyone’s able to read about any of my accomplishments. I graduated at the top of my entire class, did you know that?”

Cody replied in a calm voice. “As I said, Admiral Hackett allowed me to read your unredacted service record, Ms Traynor, so I know just how well-trained you are … and I know of your missions in the Traverse and the Nemean Abyss. You could have been … hell, maybe you should have been in the Marines.”

Cody excused himself before she could reply, walked to the beverage dispenser and fixed himself a large mug of coffee; for Traynor, a mug of hot tea. Bringing the steaming beverages back to the table, he set the tea in front of Sammy and retook his seat across from her. “Traynor, I really regret that I cannot set your record straight for you … or for Xiùlán …”

Traynor narrowed her eyes and interrupted in an icy voice that left no doubt Cody had stumbled down the wrong path. “You leave Xiùlán the hell out of this discussion, Captain! I guarantee she’s not near as unhappy with the Alliance as I am.”

Bill held both hands up, palms facing the increasingly upset Traynor, in a display intended to calm the situation. “My apologies.” Taking several sips of coffee, he went for his endgame. “Specialist, Admiral Hackett would like to see you working as an info broker in that Repository … but neither of us are going to order you to do so, despite the fact we both think you’re the best candidate for the job. I’ve done a bit of research myself, and I think I have a solution. Will you hear me out?”

“I’m still sitting here,” came the snarky reply. “Not as if I have anywhere else I can go.”

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**T’RHYN’S JEWELRY · CITY OF SERRICE, THESSIA**

Rachaél Shepard admired the look of the bonding bracelet on her wrist. It had been crafted from platinum with an inlaid, swirling design of black gold, in which were set a sprinkling of small diamonds in brilliant whites and shades of yellow; there were several tiny sapphires as well, their brilliant blues in sharp contrast to the diamonds. All were in a seemingly random pattern across the top of the bracelet—Farnia explained it as a depiction of deep space, with the jewels in various colors representing the variety of stars in the sky—a fitting piece of jewelry for one who had traveled the length and breadth of the galaxy.

Shepard’s observation of the bracelet’s loose fit on her wrist led the shop owner to comment, “You need it to be loose, at least for now, Spectre … you won’t be wearing it until the day you and Lady Liara join your lives together. Authentic bonding bracelets have a minute amount of eezo added during the forging process. The asari officiating at your bonding will touch the two bracelets together at the beginning of the ceremony – this contact will lock them together, not to be separated
until you have spoken your vows to each other. Only then will they be allowed to separate, each to then physically shrink in diameter to a comfortable fit on your wrists. Once you have bonded with an asari, your bracelet will no longer be removable, as it will not slide over your hand.”

Rachaél eased the bracelet from her wrist and handed it to the shop owner. “Please, wrap that one for me, Ms T’Rhyn. I think it’s perfect.”

The asari’s mouth fell as she cradled the bracelet in a gloved hand. “By the Goddess, Spectre … You never even inquired about the price. Are you sure?”

Shepard offered Farnia a genuine smile. With a glance at the beautiful blue being attempting to choose between platinum and gold, Rachaél replied softly, “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life, Ms T’Rhyn.”

As Farnia nodded her understanding, Shepard moved to stand in front of her Ionuín dálainn. Placing a hand gently on her arm, she asked, “Indecision, T’Soni? That’s not like you.”

A snarky expression touched Liara’s face for a moment as she replied, “I’ll be wearing this for eight or nine centuries, Rachaél. I want to find the perfect one.”

“Want me to choose one for you?”

Liara sighed heavily as she handed the two bracelets she was holding back to Farnia. “I suppose that would be best, Rachaél. If you pick one for me, I know I’ll never regret it.”

Shepard grinned, quickly kissed a pair of luscious blue lips and pointed to a bracelet neither of them had looked at. “May we look at this one, Ms T’Rhyn?”

Farnia retrieved the bracelet from the display and handed it to Liara, who immediately protested. “This is rather ostentatious, don’t you think?” She placed the dazzingly polished yellow and rose gold cuff on her wrist and looked at it carefully. There was a rather large jewel set into the center of a wider section of the band – a dark blue fluorite, cut and polished in the shape of a raised triangle with convex shaped edges and a domed top. Looking at the gem straight on, it was easy to see what had caught her Siame’s eye – the pale blue striations within, set against the deep blue background of the gem, evoked the feeling of traveling at FTL through space, with the blue-shifted stars radiating outwards from a distant center point to seemingly move past one’s viewpoint.

Rachaél smiled at Liara’s questioning look, saying, “I don’t expect you will ever see another bracelet like this one, Mo cheann geallta. It’s perfect.”

Liara handed the bracelet back to Farnia and smiled, saying, “We’ll take this one as well.”

Excellent choice, Lady Liara.” She bustled about behind the counter, carefully wrapping and packaging the two bracelets; when she was done, she asked, “Is there anything else I may do for you?”

With a quiet “Thank you, but I think we’re done for today,” Shepard activated her omnitool and waited. Farnia handed her a datapad with the relevant information about her purchases, including the price for each. Without so much as a raised eyebrow, the Spectre entered the relevant information and touched a control – her omnitool trilled its confirmation, causing the datapad to beep its acceptance of payment. Farnia touched a finger to the screen, causing it to reactivate Rachaél’s omnitool in order to download an invoice, along with information on how to care for her purchases.

Coming back out from behind the counter, Farnia observed, “I can’t wait to tell my sister about your visit, Spectre Shepard – she will be so jealous that she didn’t get to meet you today.”
Rachaél smiled as she picked up her package. “I’m sorry to have missed meeting her. Specialist Traynor spoke very highly of her … and of you. Farewell.”

Taking her Siame’s arm, Liara murmured, “Goodbye, Ms T’Rhyn.” Together the asari and her human lover strolled out of the shop into the warm sunshine of a Serrice afternoon.

♦ HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, SECURE ALLIANCE WING · THE CITADEL ♦

Samantha Traynor sent a message to the Hong Kong, asking to speak with the captain. After a short time, during which Sammy paced nervously around the room, the comm unit came to life; Sammy immediately sat in her chair and keyed the unit on. Her heart leapt in joy at seeing the image of her Inamorata. “Xiülán! I’m sorry to bother you so soon after you were just here. I have a problem … a serious dilemma, actually.”

Xiülán could see Traynor’s anxiety in the tense expression of her face. “Sà mǐ… calm down. You know there’s no problem we cannot solve if we work together.”

Traynor tried to smile at Xiülán’s unbridled and enthusiastic optimism. Just one of the reason’s I love her with all my heart, came the thought. “You know Cap’n Cody came to see me a little while ago, correct? Ai, [愛 - Love (Sam’s meaning is ‘luv’)] they … Cody … Hackett … they want me to transfer off the Normandy … into Iringù-Eßizkur … to become some sort of Alliance directed and controlled Shadow Broker.”

Traynor could see the surprise in Xiülán’s normally serene expression. “What the fuck, Sami?” After a moment, she continued with, “Am I to presume this is your dilemma?”

Traynor nodded as she said, “Definitely the background you need, but not the total problem. I don’t want to ride around in a damned Reaper if I’m doing shit for the Alliance, Xiülán … and Cody said he will not order me to assume the post, as it’s outside anything any service member has ever had to do.” After a moment, she continued, explaining, “My problem is the Alliance. If I don’t agree, they’ll simply find someone else that will volunteer.”

Looking down for a few moments, she faced the camera again; wiping her eyes, she continued, “I asked Cody if the brass would remove the blank spots from my service record – their answer was no, even without knowing my response to Hackett’s request. Fuckin’ bastards want me to continue doing their shit-jobs without doing a damned thing in return.”

Xiülán was silent for a minute as she mulled over all she’d just learned. “I have yet to hear a request for help, so I assume you have already chosen a path forward. What have you decided to do, Sà mǐ?”

“Only thing I feel I can do, and I’m telling you first, Xiülán. You are the love of my life, and these past few months have made one thing abundantly clear … we’re never going to serve together, especially since you’ve made captain. So, just as soon as I’m declared ready for duty, I’m going to resign from the Alliance.”

Xiülán’s mouth fell open in shocked surprise. “Sà mǐ, are you sure? How will you make a living?”

Samantha chuckled mirthlessly. “Really? You think my knowledge and abilities wouldn’t be useful in the private sector? I can get paid three, four or five times more than the pittance I’m making now, and I won’t have to put up with the holier-than-thou bullshit of people with less knowledge about my talents than pond scum. I’m fuckin’ done, Xiülán.”
Xiùlán nodded in reluctant agreement. “I can see your mind is made up, my love, so I won’t waste my breath trying to talk you out of it. But, have you really thought this through? You have to realize they’ll attempt to use me to get back at you for this. They’re going to call it a breach of contract.”

“I’ll pay the bastards back for my education, if that’s what’s worrying you … They’ll get their bloody credits back, Xiùlán … but only if they ask, nicely.”

“You’re going to take Iringù-Eßızkur, aren’t you?”

“İrin is a sentient being. The Alliance doesn’t own her, nor do they own the equipment inside of her. My armor won’t fit anyone else, so I’ll take it with me. I would leave my guns behind, but they’re custom-fitted for me as well. I have my blades. I’ll be fine, Ai.”

“You plan on doing all this alone?”

“Buchanan is out there somewhere—he got discharged right after the war—severe injuries. I don’t think the Alliance tried very hard to make him whole again, otherwise he’d still be wearing the uniform. I’ll track him down, see if he’d like to work with me.”

Xiùlán frowned as she asked, “What about us, Sà mĨ? When will I see you again?”

Traynor closed her eyes as she placed a hand across her nose and mouth and left it there for several moments, stifling her amusement. When she once again opened her eyes, she gasped out, “Don’t you understand, Xiùlán?” Hitting the center of her chest with a closed fist, she declared, “I carry you in here, my love … always. Never doubt that for a moment … Never! And I’ll be totally free to do what I want, when I want!” With a contented smile, she continued, “You’ll still make port calls, darling. You’ll have annual leave. No matter where you are in the galaxy, I’ll be able to join you with no trouble at all. My leaving the Alliance will actually make things easier!”

Xiùlán nodded slowly as she warmed up to the idea. “Okay then. We’ll need to figure out a way to communicate that won’t jeopardize my position here.” With a small smile, she added, “Shouldn’t be a problem for someone with your talents.”

Traynor gave her Inamorata a brilliant smile. “No, I suppose it shouldn’t.” After a moment, she concluded, “It will be a few more days before Dr Chakwas releases me for light duty, Luv. We need to have dinner together when I’m out of this place.”

“I’ll look forward to that.”
Did you really think she was a tender flower you could trample upon, and damage her very soul? She is wildfire. And she is coming to devour you whole. — Nikita Gill

**Inamorata** – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

**Irin** – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

**Siame** – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian)

🌟 **ALLIANCE DOCKS · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM 🌟

As soon as Dr Chakwas released her for light duty, Samantha Traynor approached the clawed leg of Iringù-Eßizkur with the intention of discussing her idea of taking up long-term residence within her habitat area. Standing beside the massive appendage, she tentatively placed a hand on the front facing surface of the pair of articulated ‘claws’ that formed one of the creature’s feet; she felt the deep ‘thrum’ of machinery, the vibrations gently reverberating through the obsidian leg and foot. ... a living machine, completely self-aware, came the thought. Gazing up at Iringù-Eßizkur’s ‘face’, she was struck, not for the first time, by a pang of fear. Everything about these creatures was designed to terrorize, and now they’re going to be the salvation of every space-faring race in the galaxy.

In addition to the nearly indistinct vibration of hidden machinery, Traynor became aware of music … faint … sounding infinitely ancient. “Iringù-Eßizkur,” she whispered. “Are you … singing?”

The ancient melody continued unabated as the Repository replied softly, What you are hearing is… was… music played and sung by many of the billions of harvested organics utilized in my creation as a sentient being.

Sammy thought about this as she slid her hand down the coolness of the unknown alloy making up the creature’s clawed foot. “It’s a beautiful sound, Irin. The race of people—you told me you only harvested females—they must have had enough leisure time to create many forms of art, including this music. What a terrible loss for the galaxy.”

Iringù-Eßizkur sounded … slightly ashamed. The only loss to the galaxy was their lives, Samantha. It sounds callous, but I carry within me all of the accumulated knowledge … of the arts—literature, music, unique paintings—created by the race we ascended. The only way it could be lost would be for me to be … destroyed in some manner.

“Then we must make sure you continue to exist, Iringù-Eßizkur.” Thinking of what she had just said, she added, “I myself have a need that I hope you will be willing to help me fulfill.”

The tone of Iringù-Eßizkur’s voice changed to one of curiosity. Would you rather that we converse privately, Samantha?

Traynor stepped back from the construct’s massive leg as she answered the query. “That would be agreeable, Irin.”

Once inside the Repository’s habitat compartments, Traynor had only needed to speak with the primeval machine intelligence for less than ten minutes before Iringù-Eßizkur stated she would be
willing to continue in her role as transport and protector – provided her occupants, whomever they may be, did not violate any of the tenets set forth by Žiuk’Durmah or THE SHEPARD regarding their new directives to aid in the stability and rebuilding of the galaxy. *I will not cause harm, except in self-defense or in defense of innocents. Are these conditions acceptable, Samantha?*

“Absolutely, Irin. That is the primary reason I have to do this; the capabilities you possess and the equipment installed here provides too much power for any single government to possess. It must be used for the good of everyone in the galaxy—not just for us humans—as the Alliance would likely end up doing.” Traynor waved her hand, indicating all the equipment contained within the sentient machine. “Whoever controls all of this must be independent from any single government.”

*If the mission is to continue, what of Garrus Vakarian? Liara T’Soni? Will they return? I miss their discussions, as their presence was … educational.*

“I’m sorry, but Liara has retired to Thessia with Shepard … there to become bonded in the fashion of the asari; she has no intention of resuming her position as the Shadow Broker.” Traynor wasn’t sure where to look as she talked to the construct, so split her visual attention between the deck at her feet and the panels in the overhead. “It is my intention to contact her and discuss the possibility of me taking over the network and continuing her work, seeing as I assisted her on the *Normandy.*”

*Will you be attempting to perform this task alone, Samantha? It would not seem to be a wise thing to do.*

“I’ve already begun a search for a companion, Iringù-Eibizkur … a man I used to work with, before the war with your kind. I trust him with my life, and he trusts me with his. It will probably be difficult convincing him to accept you as a viable conveyance, but he has a great deal of common sense … I believe he will listen to reason.”

To that end, Traynor checked local time in the Thessian city of Armali. Discovering it to be mid-afternoon there, she placed a secure call to the T’Soni estate in order to speak with Liara – if she was to truly become an information trader, she would need access to the resources T’Soni had acquired during her time on Illium, as well as on the previous Broker’s ship and during her time on the *Normandy.*

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*T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA*

Liara answered the unexpected call with a broad smile on her face. “Samantha! What a pleasant surprise … I hope all is well on the *Normandy.*” The dour expression on Traynor’s face said otherwise and the beautiful smile faded quickly as she added, “Goddess! What has happened, Samantha?”

The specialist provided the asari a quick summary of her recent history, ending with the Alliance’s repeated refusal to restore her service record, while omitting Cody’s request for her to take over as an information broker aboard Iringù-Ebizkur. “So I’m going to resign, Liara … I simply refuse to be used and taken advantage of by an ungrateful military regime, especially when I have other options … better options … open to me.”

‘Wary’ wasn’t exactly the correct word to describe the sudden feeling she had, but Liara turned away from the screen momentarily, wanting to have input from the former commander, thinking perhaps Traynor was preparing to ask her for a job. “Rachaël? Could you join us please?”

As Shepard slid into the picture, Samantha smiled softly. “*It is very good to see you again,*
Commander. You’re looking well.”

Liara blushed as Rachaël chuckled softly and responded. “You as well, Traynor. And I have to thank you for pointing us to the T’Rhyn jewelry store in Serrice … We purchased our bonding bracelets there just yesterday.”

“Oh, my God!” Traynor’s eyes lit with delight. “Congratulations! I can’t think of a more deserving couple!”

Shepard nodded as Liara answered for them. “Thank you, Samantha.” She wrapped an arm around the waist of her Siame as she continued, “Now … We were speaking of what you called better options. If you are looking for employment following your imminent resignation from the Alliance, I would be more than happy to employ you within my household, as your skills are exemplary … or to provide references, if you are looking elsewhere.”

Traynor’s face held an amused smirk as she said, “I’m very glad to hear that, Liara … your offer is most kind, especially considering all you endured with me during our trip back within Žiuk’Durmah, but what I have in mind is a bit more … significant.” Sammy then went on to explain the offer Captain Cody had made to her, as well as her aversion to the Alliance—or any individual government or military—having access to such a powerful resource. “I am convinced that, if I refuse, they’ll simply try to find someone else to volunteer. As I very much doubt you care to resume your role as the Shadow Broker, I am wondering if you would assist me in taking over the network … as an individual outside of the Alliance.”

Traynor was unsure what the asari was thinking … as Liara’s eyes flashed in what could only be described as concern. Liara was shaking her head as she replied, “They absolutely cannot be allowed to do that, Samantha … but I am happy here and have no desire to carry on as an information broker … in that, you are absolutely correct … but neither can you do that job alone.” She gave Rachaël an appreciative glance before continuing, “You need to have someone with you that can be trusted implicitly … a person you would be able to trust with your very life, in fact, to act as a check and balance … to help you avoid the enormous temptations such power presents.”

“I’ve already thought of that, Liara, and I really have no desire to travel alone within a Repository, even one such as Iringü-Eßizkur. As such, I’m trying to locate my other teammate from my days in Spec-Ops, Griffen Buchanan; I trusted the man with my life, and he trusted me with his. We always worked well together.”

Shepard squeezed Liara’s hand and gave a nod of approval, prompting the former Shadow Broker to draw in a deep breath and blow it out slowly before answering, “Find him, Samantha, and I will help you with whatever you need to get started. We cannot allow the Alliance, nor any government … including the Council … to gain control of such a powerful resource.” Looking down for several moments, the asari seemed to come to a decision; she raised her eyes to the image in front of her and said, “To that end, I am transmitting information to the secure terminal behind where you are sitting. You already have the codes to open the files—the data they contain will provide you with some … limited … resources—a small sum of credits, and a modest apartment …” at Sammy’s sudden intake of breath, she grinned mischievously as she hurried to continue, “… and no, it is not the Tiberius Towers apartment on the strip.”

Traynor nodded her understanding and smiled. “Thank you, Liara. I wish you and Shepard the best for your future on Thessia.” She suddenly grinned as she added, “I’ll stay in touch … and I want you to know that if you ever need anything, the services of this Shadow Broker will be at your disposal, for as long as I’m in control of the network.”
Captain Bill Cody looked up from his terminal display as Ensign Coleen Pruitt entered the loft ahead of Specialist Samantha Traynor, after a double tap on the door’s surface followed by a two-count wait. He frowned slightly at the interruption, prompting the yeoman to say, “Traynor insisted on seeing you, Sir … said you were the only officer on board that could take care of her request.”

With a sigh, Cody got to his feet and offered his hand as Traynor approached his desk. After a perfunctory handshake, he waved her to the chair in front of the desk, which she politely declined to take.

“I don’t want to take up too much of your time, Captain – best to not get too comfortable.” She placed a datapad, its display turned so he could read it, on the desk in front of him. Clasping her hands behind her, she stood stiffly in front of him while gazing into the distance, her face an impassive mask.

Cody quickly skimmed over the text displayed on the device’s screen before looking up at her. “Are you sure you really want to go through with this, Specialist?”

She glanced down at him without moving her head, asking a question of her own. “Is the Alliance going to restore my service record, Sir?”

“I’m sorry, Specialist. You know that correcting that wrong isn’t within my power, and the senior staff has already told me they’re not going to stick their necks out for you.”

Having returned her gaze to the distance, she replied evenly, “Then respectfully, Sir, the answer to your inquiry is yes … I am formally requesting that you endorse my petition for an honorable separation from the Systems Alliance Navy.”

Bill Cody was at a loss – he had absolutely nothing that he could offer … worse still, the Navy had nothing they were willing to offer … not a damned thing to entice this outstanding young woman to remain in the service. Any good will the Alliance may have enjoyed at the start of her career had been squandered by their cavalier attitude since then … with the wrongful termination of the Ø7 program—influenced by agents working for Cerberus, and the resultant massive redaction of her service record, leaving Traynor little to show for her training and sacrifice—the ultimate display of contempt for impossible jobs well done.

It had been his suggestion that she take this course of action when he had met her at Huerta Memorial, but he never actually believed she would take his advice. With a sigh, he pressed his thumb to the datapad, used the stylus to sign his name, then pressed the control to transmit the document—with his endorsement—to the Alliance personnel department, with a copy to Admiral Hackett. Standing, he returned the datapad; after pressing a control on his desk, he asked, “So, what will you do now, Ms Traynor.”

Noting the change in the way he addressed her, she replied, “I’m not really sure, Captain … I guess I’ll find an apartment ashore … get my personal gear moved off the ship.” She smiled grimly as the hatch behind her parted and slid into its pockets to re-admit Ensign Pruitt. “I’ll have to see if I’m able to land a job working for a high-tech firm on the Presidium Ring, in spite of my seriously redacted service record. My college diploma should help me there.”

Cody nodded his understanding, saying only, “I see.” His cheeks coloring slightly at what he was about to do, he nodded to the Yeoman and with his voice carrying a great deal of regret, said softly, “Ensign Pruitt, please escort Ms Traynor off the ship … after she has had an opportunity to bid her friends farewell. Even though she is no longer a member of the Systems Alliance Navy, she is still a
friend to many on this ship.”

Before Pruitt could respond, Sammy reached up to her own neck, there to grab the beaded chain that carried her dog tags. Gazing at the small metal plates with all her vital information embossed in their surfaces, she sighed; returning her gaze to Cody, she carefully pulled the chain up and over her head, allowed it to dangle between her fingers for a long, silent moment before carefully placing it and the tags it carried in the middle of his desk.

Cody looked down at the shiny metal objects for several moments before returning his gaze to Sammy’s face. “You do realize you’re not required to give those back to me, don’t you?”

“I don’t expect I’ll have any further need of them, Sir.” Extending her hand, she added, “So long, Captain. Serving in the Alliance hasn’t always been a pleasant experience, but I can honestly say it’s been a pleasure to serve on this ship, especially under your command.”

The yeoman started to touch Traynor’s elbow to guide her out of Cody’s office, but quickly changed her mind when she saw Sammy’s body tense up. Saying, “Ms Traynor, if you would?” she waited a moment for Sam to turn, then followed her towards the exit.

♦ COMMERCIAL DOCKS · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Traynor had cleared out all her personal gear—clothing and equipment—from her storage locker on the Normandy before meeting with Captain Cody in his office – she had even grabbed her rifle, shotgun and heavy pistol from the weapons locker. Even if she had no real claim to the weapons, she figured Cody wouldn’t really be interested in getting them back.

After meeting with Cody in the loft, she had also said her goodbyes to the few people on the ship she cared about. Edi had expressed … regret, and sadness, that Sammy felt it necessary to leave the Alliance; on the other hand, the ever snarky Joker had completely ignored her while she was on the bridge. Despite Traynor’s assistance in reconfiguring Edi’s ‘lady parts’ so she could have … and provide … a more enjoyable sexual experience with the flight lieutenant, he had felt she was a loose cannon ever since she had injured Liara T’Soni and Edi with her fists. After viewing the video of her takedown of Javik, he had lived with the fear she would go after him if he even looked at her wrong.

Saying goodbye to the Normandy’s engineers, Gabriella Daniels in particular, was really tough; Gabby had tears in her eyes as she gave Traynor an earnest hug, nearly squeezing the breath from Sammy’s still healing lungs. “I’ve never met anyone like you, Specialist, and I will never forget you. Please take care of yourself out there.” Sammy also hated saying goodbye to Bethany and Sarah; each of the young Marines expressed their sadness at Sammy’s departure from the Normandy … and from the Alliance.

Of all the farewells she had to endure, it had been especially difficult for her to bid goodbye to Steve Cortez. They had shared a real adventure together inside Harbinger after Sammy had successfully prevented Javik’s destruction of Žiuk’Durmah – their trip back to the Citadel while ‘camping’ in the wrecked UT-47a had been a real test of how well they could get along on short rations and even less privacy. “I’m really sorry to see you leave the service, Traynor. I can assure you this ship will not be the same without you, and I really hate that you’ll no longer be a Chief Warrant Officer in the Navy.”

Cortez was too shy to make the first move, so Traynor took the initiative, enveloping the Lieutenant Commander in a tight hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek. “Dammit, Steve … I’m really going to miss you as well … and who knows? I’ll still be in the same galaxy, so we’re bound to run into each
other at some point in the future. Just stay safe out there, okay? Try to avoid wrecking any more UT-47’s – leave that to Mr Vega.”

Dr Chakwas was another person especially sorry to see the specialist leave, not just the *Normandy*, but the Systems Alliance, saying, “Just who will you turn to when you get hurt out there, Samantha? I really doubt there’ll be any physicians nearby to assist you should you get injured.”

Traynor had been forced to admit she didn’t have an answer to that question, but would consider some sort of solution going forward. “I’ll just have to avoid physical conflict with others,” she had replied, drawing a snort of derision from the good doctor.

“I really cannot see a future for you that doesn’t involve physical conflict with others, Sam. Promise me you’ll at least do your best to avoid exploding furniture.”

She had stowed everything away in the habitat area inside Iringù-Eßizkur, then directed the construct to relocate to the commercial docks, two kilometers from the *Normandy* and *Hong Kong*’s berths and outside the military-zoned docks. The Destroyer-class Repository had expressed joy that Sammy would be occupying the space for the foreseeable future, and had agreed to reconfiguring the kitchen, sleeping and lavatory areas as needed in order to ensure Traynor’s comfort.

>I realize my interior is not visually friendly to an organic such as yourself; do you think I need to adjust the colors?<i></i>

After stowing her gear, she powered up all the Broker’s equipment, in part to ensure that everything was still operating as it should, but also to begin searching for Buchanan’s whereabouts. If this was going to work, she needed to heed Liara’s suggestion and recruit a second person to go with her, a person with good technical ability, in addition to combat skills – Griff would be an ideal companion, but only if she could convince him to join her. After setting two of the many computers to search for him, she made a call to the *Hong Kong*. She needed to speak with Xiùlán, and hoped to do so at dinner on the station, but first, she was going over to Huerta Memorial to meet with a friend.

♦ HUERTA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, SECURE ALLIANCE WING • CITADEL ♦

Sandra Patton had spent the previous two weeks alone in her room after Specialist Traynor had been released for light duty. She was particularly saddened to learn the specialist had resigned from the Alliance Navy only four days after her departure from the hospital, especially since Sammy hadn’t bothered to tell her of her plans. She had only learned from Dr Chakwas that after Traynor met with Captain Cody, she had been immediately escorted off the *Normandy*; no longer in possession of military identification, she’d even had Iringù-Eßizkur relocate to the commercial space docks in order to keep someone from the Alliance from trying to commandeer her.

Sandra had finally been released to light duty herself; she had dressed and was waiting for an orderly to escort her to the main lobby so she could go back to the *Normandy*. A knock on the door preceded the entry of a wheelchair being pushed by Emil Vinson; smiling at Patton, he said, “Looks like you’re all ready to leave us, Master Guns.” Waving at the chair, he added, “If you would care to have a seat, I’ll wheel you down to the lobby. Is anyone meeting you? You really should have someone accompany you back to the *Normandy*.”

“Actually, I don’t believe anyone’s coming to meet me, Mr Vinson … it’s okay, though. I feel confident I can walk the short distance with no problem.”

Vinson didn’t look convinced. “I can call someone on the ship, if you like.”

“It’s okay, Mr Vinson. I’ll be fine.” Sandra turned and lowered herself into the chair; Emil grabbed
the bag containing her few possessions; setting this in her lap, he turned the chair, wheeled her out of the room and into the passageway.

Vinson wheeled Sandra Patton through the main entrance and out of the main lobby of the hospital. Patton looked up and back at the orderly to say, “Thank you for bringing me down from my room, Mr Vinson.” Moving her feet from the chair’s footrests to the concrete, she gripped the armrests and pushed herself up. Making sure she was steady, Emil looked past her; recognizing the woman walking towards them he said, “Looks like someone got word you were being discharged.”

Patton quickly looked at Emil with a questioning look before turning her attention towards the direction he was facing. After a few moments, she recognized the person approaching. “Traynor? Sammy … is that really you, Sammy?”

The former Alliance chief warrant officer grinned cheekily as she drew close enough to speak without having to shout. “Sandee! It’s so good to see you again! How are you doing?”

“Better, now that you’re here, Sammy.” Patton swiped at the moisture running down her cheeks and laughed shakily. “I thought I’d never see you again!”

Sammy stepped up to the Master Gunnery Sergeant and wrapped her arms around her in a warm hug of comradeship. Stepping back, with her hands gripping Patton’s upper arms, she replied, “I’m sorry I haven’t been back to see you before now, Sandee, but I’m not exactly welcome on the Alliance side of the fence anymore … maybe after a few months, that’ll change, but for now …” She shrugged her shoulders and waved at Emil. “Anyway, I’ll walk with you back to the ship, make sure you arrive okay.”

Patton smirked at her friend as she asked, “How will you walk with me to the ship if you cannot enter the Alliance docks?”

“I’m accompanying you,” came the snarky reply. “You’re still in the military, so there shouldn’t be any problem if you tell the guards I’m your escort back to the Normandy, or base housing.”

“Why in hell did you quit, Samantha?” Patton’s expression was disbelief mixed with sad regret. “Seems to me you’ve invested too much time to just drop everything and walk away from your career.”

Sammy’s smile was grim as she turned and began to slowly head back to the docks. “Until I actually see the conditions Alliance brass attached to my release, I probably shouldn’t say too much about those years, Sandee. What I can tell you is …” Traynor went on to explain what Hackett and Cody had wanted her to do and part of her reasons for quitting. Patton was so interested in Traynor’s story she was more than a bit surprised when Sammy stopped walking to gently grasp her upper arm and say, “Here we are … you just need to check in with the Marine guarding the entry; he’ll let you in so you can return to your quarters.”

Sandra’s smile held a touch of embarrassment as she turned to face Sammy. “After hearing a bit about your training, I have a better understanding of how well you took care of yourself … and me … inside that batarian hornets’ nest.” After a brief pause, she continued, “And when I heard you had resigned, I thought maybe you’d forgotten about me, and I really hated that you didn’t come around to tell me goodbye.”

Traynor’s expression mirrored Patton’s embarrassed look as she replied, “I feel bad I didn’t come by to see you before today, Sandee … I don’t have enough friends in my life to be alienating those I do have, and dammit, I really do consider you a friend. You’ll be seeing me again, never fear.”
Patton sighed as she pulled Traynor in for a final hug; after wrapping her arms around Sandra once more, Sammy pushed back slightly and kissed her on the cheek. “Take care of yourself, Master Guns. Don’t let these people get you killed.”

Patton looked at her friend in slack-jawed amazement. “My god, Sammy … are you clairvoyant? Captain Reuben Warner said nearly those exact same words to me on the Shanghai … as I was getting ready to board the shuttle for the trip to the Normandy.” With a slight shake of her head, she smiled at Sammy, saying, “You take care of yourself, Traynor. You’re not the only soul out here that needs all the friends you can find.” With a nod and a wink, Patton turned and walked up to the Marine guarding the entry hatch; in moments, she disappeared inside the ship.

♦

THE CAPTAIN’S TABLE RESTAURANT · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

• TEN DAYS AFTER LEAVING THE ALLIANCE •

Yuán Xiùlán waited in the lobby of the same restaurant where she’d accompanied Miranda Lawson to a dinner with Kaidan Alenko shortly after the Normandy had been returned from the outer edge of the galaxy … seemed like nearly forever now since that evening. She had chosen clothes similar to the outfit she had worn the previous time she had been here – tailored dark blue pants paired with a short-sleeve, medium V-neck sweater in light blue. Hanging from her neck on its 75 cm. gold chain was the tiger shark tooth necklace, given to her as a New Year’s gift in 2180 by Sammy. Her shiny, midnight black hair flowed loose down her back, tamed somewhat with a number of strategically placed jeweled pins across the back of her head just above her neck. A loose fitting black leather jacket and short black boots completed her outfit. She was carrying her Karpov model-10 pistol in its specially designed and fitted holster under her left arm.

Tonight, she was waiting for her Inamorata to arrive so they could discuss all that had transpired during the past few weeks. Truth be known, Xiùlán had been feeling a bit ill inside—nearly nauseous, actually—ever since she’d learned Sammy had actually resigned from the Navy … It was like a bad dream from which she could not awaken. She had managed to hold herself together while Sammy spoke with her over the comm system, then had remained at her desk for ten or more minutes after Sammy had cut the connection, tears streaming down her face in reaction to her Inamorata’s seemingly rash action.

Speaking with her former captain afterwards, she had expressed disbelief at Sammy’s attitude until Bill had given her Sammy’s dog tags and chain. “Give these back to her, Xiùlán,” he had said in a gentle voice. “I know she was upset – hell, I was just as upset as she was, because I couldn’t think of any way in this galaxy to convince her to stay. And … tell her I really regret that it had to come down to this. She won’t believe me, but I really considered her an asset to me … to the ship … and the Navy … even if the Alliance refused to recognize that fact.”

Fingering the flat, oval-edged metal plates with Traynor’s vitals embossed in the surface of each, she had a hunch she’d be returning to the Hong Kong with them in a pocket, perhaps to place in the frame on her desk that encased the holo of Sammy and herself, recorded so long ago. Good times, back then, she thought. Gāisīde! [該死的 – Damn it!]

When she saw Sammy come through the front door, Xiùlán almost didn’t recognize her; she looked absolutely incredible … and just so … totally out of character. She was so completely out of uniform, having opted to show up here in … a dress. Xiùlán studied Sammy as the curvy woman sauntered towards her in a China blue and red plum shift dress featuring a medallion print, with a tie front and sheer-like bell sleeves. The hem looked to be about 5 centimeters above her knees, but it was a bit hard to tell, as she was also wearing a pair of calf-hugging over-the-knee boots in black suede.
Traynor stopped right in front of her lover; placing a hand on her left hip with her weight on that leg, she asked, “Well, what do you think? Too much? Not enough?”

Xiùlán realized with a start her Xīnxīnxiāngyìn 心心相印—(literally), soulmate—was … wearing makeup—mascara and dark eyeliner, with a dusky eye shadow that hinted of blue-gray, and lipstick in a gorgeous shade of red. Looking Traynor up and down, Xiùlán’s lustful expression told her Inamorata everything she needed to know … she totally approved of Sammy’s look. “May my revered ancestors forgive me, Sà mǐ! You look absolutely exquisite! I didn’t …” The captain paused to swallow – why was it all of a sudden so damned hot in this place? “… I didn’t think you would ever wear a dress!”

“What? Don’t be silly! Just because I can drill you between the eyes at a hundred meters doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy wearing girly stuff! Besides, I’m not as unarmed as I appear to be – there’s a dagger inside my left boot-top. I was going to wear a pistol strapped to my inner thigh, but placing the damned thing so I could walk naturally meant its form would show.” Traynor gently grasped Xiùlán’s upper arm as she leaned in to place a kiss on lush lips.

Xiùlán hummed in pleasure as she relished the taste of Traynor’s mouth on her own; it didn’t hurt Xiùlán’s opinion that she could detect a slight hint of perfume. When Traynor had drawn back, Xiùlán sighed her name and told her, “Sà mǐ … it’s a damned good thing we’re out in public, or so help me, I’d reach under that dress just to see if you’re wearing panties!”

Traynor gave her a look of snarky pity and said, “Really, Xiùlán? What kind of woman do you think I am? Denying myself the pleasure of watching you slowly slide my knickers down my legs later is the last thing I want to do!” Looking about, she finished with, “Now, I’m hungry … let’s go have a nice dinner. There is much I need to discuss with you before I let you accompany me to my new apartment.”

“New apart …” She trailed off, assuming all would be made clear as the evening progressed. Glancing over to the arched entryway into the dining area, she saw the maître d’ looking up from his nearby desk; instantly recognizing the tall Chinese woman from her previous visit, he quickly walked over to greet her. Determined to avoid being intimidated as he had been before, he stopped a few paces in front of her and asked, “Will you be joining us for dinner again, Ma’am?”

Xiùlán smiled and, including Sammy by wrapping an arm around her waist, replied, “Yes, along with my Qíngrén,” 情人—Lover; in a quiet area, near the back, if possible.”

Unlike his previous reaction to Xiùlán when she had accompanied Miranda for dinner with Major Alenko, the maître d’ managed to maintain his professional demeanor as he inclined his head and responded, “If you will follow me, I will show you to a table.”

Beckoning to the head-waiter as he led the pair to a relatively secluded table, he assisted Traynor in taking her seat across from Xiùlán; after making sure the pair were satisfied with his choice of table for them he left the couple in the care of the head waiter, who asked, “Would either of you care for some liquid refreshment before you order?”

Xiùlán spoke first, ordering a whisky with a splash of lime for her Inamorata, and a vodka martini for herself. After the man had departed, Xiùlán looked at Sammy and asked, “Apartment, Sà mǐ? You’re out of the military only two weeks and you already have an apartment?”

Sammy smiled as a waitress appeared and set their drinks on the table. After taking a sip from her glass, she looked at Xiùlán past half-lidded eyes and said, “The Shadow Broker has … well, had … a fortune in credits here on this station, along with numerous properties, both here and in several of the colonies. After speaking with her regarding my actions over the past several days, she allowed
me access to a limited number of those credits and the use of a modest apartment in the Bravo arm of
the station.” Sammy’s shy smile spoke volumes about her intentions. “I’ve taken the liberty of using
a few of those credits to begin financing my start as an information broker.”

“So, just like old times, then? Have you located Griff?”

Traynor sipped her whiskey, set the glass gently on the table and replied, “I’m working on it … got
the equipment running, tasked two computers with tracking him down. Man like that shouldn’t be
too hard to find … I expect the difficult part will be convincing him to join me inside a Reaper. Very
few people below the level of top brass have any knowledge that the Normandy was brought back
from the outer rim of the galaxy inside a Reaper, or that several ships, including your own, made the
trip from Arcturus to the Sol System inside Harbinger.”

Xiùlán looked up to see the head waiter approaching. Taking a long sip of her vodka martini, she
used her eyes to warn Sammy, prompting her to finish her own drink. The waiter inquired if the pair
had chosen their meals and asked about their beverages. Sammy asked for a refill, leaving Xiùlán to
order meals for both of them. After departing to get Sammy another drink, Xiùlán asked, “What will
you do out there, Sà mǐ? I cannot imagine there’s that large a market for information.”

“Information is power, Xiùlán – you should know that. The original Shadow broker had a large,
personal army—both for data mining and for busting heads—of agents all over the galaxy, and he
was definitely not someone to be trifled with. I’m acquainted with his replacement; she turned out to
be less of a ruthless killer. That may have cost her some business, but she was primarily engaged in
searching for a way to stop the onslaught of the Reapers; once they arrived, her entire network of
agents was slowly decimated, system by system.” Traynor stopped talking as the waitress silently
appeared at her elbow, placed her drink on the table and left. Sammy continued her explanation
with, “I plan on rebuilding the entire network – I’ll find and employ former agents if I can, or else
recruit new people to work for me.”

Their conversation was interrupted once again – this time by the waitress bringing out their dinners
and wine. Xiùlán began speaking as Sammy started eating. “I have some news of my own, Sà mǐ. Admiral Hackett has ordered the Hong Kong to the Petra Nebula … there’s been reports of a number of
slavers operating in the Vetus System.”

“Elysium?” Sammy looked up at her Inamorata, salad fork paused above her plate. “Batarian
going back to their old ways?”

“No attacks so far, but the leaders in Illyria are nervous. Repairs and rebuilding are being done with
the assistance of our former enemies, but another slaver and pirate attack like the Blitz in 2176 would
be a disaster. Trouble is, there are no other ships available.”

Traynor grimaced in distaste. “The Reapers nearly destroyed all the systems in Kite’s Nest – one of
the official reports I’ve seen postulates they don’t have a population sufficient to sustain them as a
race.”

Xiùlán sipped a bit of wine and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “So, it would appear the
Reapers succeeded in wiping out at least one race, even if they didn’t harvest all of them.”

Taking the bite of salad she had been holding over her plate, she chewed the leafy greens as she
thought about batarian pirates. “Tell you what, Xiùlán. I’ll do some investigating while I’m
searching for Griff … see what shakes loose. Slavers in the Petra Nebula have to fly through
Exodus – no other connections for them to use from the Kite’s Nest.”

“That would be greatly appreciated, Sà mǐ. I won’t be able to repay …”
“... It’s a gift, Xiùlán,” Traynor hurried to say. “You’ll be going into that system blind; I’ll not allow the Alliance Navy to get you and the crew of the *Hong Kong* injured or killed … not while I’m in a position to assist you with intel.” Traynor grasped the back of a cored hand with her own and stared lovingly into sable brown eyes. “I realize you’ll have Asharru accompanying you, but any information I can provide about what you might encounter there can only help all of us.”

Xiùlán rotated her hand in order to grasp the hand of her Qíngrén. "It would be foolish of me to decline your assistance, Ai.” [愛 - Love (Xiùlán’s meaning is ‘luv’)] Each resumed eating their dinners as Xiùlán pondered the new direction her *Inamorata’s* life was taking, and how it would affect their lives in the near future.
Settling In

*The last time you kiss someone does not have to feel like you are losing them in a war.* – Nikita Gill, *Your Soul is a River*

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**Inamorata** – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

**Irin** – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-EBizkur’

**Qíngrén** – [情人 – lover]

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***BRAVO WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM***

Sammy and Xiūlán, having finished a leisurely dinner in the *Captain’s Table* restaurant, had taken an aircar ride over to the station’s Bravo Ward, where they were now strolling hand-in-hand along a boulevard bisecting a cluster of residential structures. Traynor inspected the map display on her omnitool for several moments as she compared it to their surroundings. With a nod of her head, she pointed to an unassuming structure several meters away, saying, “That’s the building … the apartment occupies the upper floor.”

Xiūlán looked at the area around her, as if fixing in her mind the various entry and exit routes. Looking at the building again as they resumed walking, her only comment was, “Did Liara tell you this was a *modest* apartment?”

Sammy paused at the main building entrance; entering the code to unlock the door, she replied while the electronic sequence produced the distinct mechanical sounds of dead bolts retracting—some into the door, others into the frame—their metallic sounds softly echoing in the stillness that was routine in the residential areas of the numerous wards in Bravo. “That’s what she told me … I suppose it’s modest by Liara’s standards.”

Shaking her head slightly as she followed her *Inamorata* into the dimly-lit lobby, she observed, “Place like this back home could house five, maybe even six families.” Gazing about the area as they moved to a private elevator, she asked, “What goes on here on this level, Sà mǐ?”

Traynor entered her passcode to open the elevator doors as she answered, “A couple of businesses, asari owned and operated.” Upon entering the car, she input another passcode to unlock the control console. Touching the Haptic interface resulted in the doors closing and the car ascending to the second level; the doors silently retracted into their recesses to reveal a modestly furnished sitting area. Adjacent to this was a small kitchen with counter seating for three or four. On the other side of the main sitting area was a large doorway leading to a pair of bedrooms, one a bit larger than the other. Xiūlán nodded in approval as she glanced around. “This is nice, Sà mǐ … very nice. It’s good to know you’re not going to be living inside that Repository while you’re here at the Citadel.”

Traynor nodded her agreement. “Tomorrow, I need to do a bit of shopping—need to lay in some supplies—food and drink. I’m going to set up a secure comms unit, and I’ll install several servers the I can slave to the computers within Iringù-EBizkur. That way, I don’t have to keep returning to her in order to check progress on my searches.” After a short pause, she continued to share her thoughts. “Once I find a more secure area for her to park—someplace that won’t draw a lot of attention from either the public or the authorities, like C-Sec—I’ll upgrade the QEC terminal inside, then upgrade the rest of the equipment to reflect current practices. Several of the servers are over eighteen months old.”
Xiùlán replied, “It … or rather she … is a space-faring construct. Couldn’t she simply fly an orbit of the Citadel when you’re not actively working inside her?”

Traynor’s thoughtful expression was broken by a small grin as she replied, “I hadn’t thought of that. We’ll discuss it tomorrow … after I locate a better place for her to stand.”

Xiùlán followed as Sammy moved into the bedroom; sitting on the edge of the bed, she retrieved the knife secreted in her left boot top, then loosened the fasteners and pulled the boots off her legs and feet. Standing again, she placed them in the nearby closet before walking up to Xiùlán; turning her back, she said, “If you’d be so kind?”

Xiùlán reached around Sammy’s waist to gently hug her from behind; with her lips brushing an ear, she whispered, “You getting ready for bed already, Qíngrén?”

“Not sleepy yet, darling. It’s still early … but I do want you to peel this dress off me, then let me help you undress, unless you need to get back to your ship right away.”

Xiùlán smiled as she trailed her lips along the baby-fine hair on the back of Sammy’s neck; the sudden intake of breath was exactly the reaction she was looking for. Unfastening the closures down the back of the dress, she reached around to pull the now loosened neckline forward and down so Sammy could pull her arms from the sleeves. Xiùlán looked at Sammy’s powerful shoulders, the now completely exposed red dragon tattoo rippling in rhythm with her well-developed back muscles as she moved her arms; shocked realization caused her to exclaim, “Sà mǐ! No bra?”

Traynor turned around slowly within her lover’s arms, clutching the bodice of the dress to her chest. “Support’s built in, Luv.” She slowly lowered the fabric to reveal her bare breasts one at a time, enjoying the look of lust in Xiùlán’s eyes. “I think I just may have piqued your interest, darling.” Placing a hand on Xiùlán’s shoulder, she used the other to lower the dress past her hips and down her legs, to step out of it and bring it back up in front of her like a shield. With a snarky grin, she sighed, “Your turn.”

Yuán smiled as she moved to the closet, there to slowly remove her jacket and hang it within. After Sammy removed the jeweled pins from the hair at the back of her head, Xiùlán pulled her sweater up and carefully pulled her arms out; once she’d slid it over her head, Sammy gently pulled it down and free from the long, ebony hair. While folding the garment, Sammy caught sight of the Karpov model-10 riding in its custom holster attached to the left side of her bra and snarked, “Shit, Xiùlán … I’m glad I didn’t attempt to fondle your left boob! No telling what might set that gun off.”

“It only fires if the person attached to the hand is some ignorant perv. You, on the other hand, may fondle one or both to your heart’s content.” So saying, she detached the holster, set it and the pistol on the dresser with her sweater, then removed her bra, adding, “Better for me if your hands can caress my skin, don’t you think?”

It was Traynor’s turn to wantonly gaze at her Inamorata. Moving to stand right in front of her, Xiùlán shuddered with anticipation as the tops of Sammy’s bare breasts softly brushed the undersides of her own. Her lover reached around behind Xiùlán’s neck to release the clasp of her necklace; bringing the loose ends of the chain back around to the front, she carefully laid it and the rare shark’s tooth on the dresser beside Xiùlán’s pistol. “Don’t need that thing slicing either of us open tonight … Might be a tad embarrassing to explain to a doctor in an emergency room.”

Xiùlán gazed with rapt awe at Sammy’s butt, exposed as it was by the skimpy thong she had earlier referred to as ‘knickers’. As she turned back to face Xiùlán, Sammy pulled off her lover’s boots and slacks, leaving Xiùlán in only her panties.
Traynor hung the pants in her closet, then moved to stand in front of Xiùlán again, this time reaching around to gently draw her close; covering her lips with her own, she used her talented tongue to joust for dominance. Breathing hard without parting their lips, they each reveled in the grasp of the other as strong hands massaged each other’s backs, shoulders-to-waist.

Sammy hooked her thumbs in the waistband of Xiùlán’s panties and began easing them down over her well-developed derriere; Xiùlán’s response was to quickly bring her hands up between them to softly grasp and knead Sammy’s breasts. Xiùlán pushed gently, causing Sammy to gasp in surprise as her legs hit the mattress and she fell backwards onto the bed. Like a feral cat, Xiùlán pounced, quickly grabbing Sammy’s legs at the ankles and pushing up until her bare feet were level with Xiùlán’s neck. Allowing Traynor’s feet to rest on her shoulders, she reached down and grabbed the waistband of Sammy’s ‘knickers’ and began pulling them off, saying in a husky voice, “If I recall, this is something you really wanted to watch me do.”

Traynor’s eyes followed every move Xiùlán made as she tugged the black-lace thong off of upraised legs; Sammy spread her legs slightly to make the passage a bit easier, but Xiùlán had a lot of practice at getting Sammy out of her underwear, so really had no need of the assistance.

As soon as the skimpy panties cleared both feet, Sammy spread her legs further until she could slide her calves and feet down Xiùlán’s sides, while Xiùlán leaned down to place a loving kiss on each of Traynor’s nipples; this elicited a nervous giggle of pleasure from Sammy, who whispered, “I hope you’re ready for a long night, my love …”

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Griffen Buchanan had been working on the MSV Celestial Viper since shortly after his disability discharge from the Systems Alliance Navy. The ship’s crew—a mix of humans and salarians—numbered eleven, including the captain and two officers. Griff had originally been hired as the ship’s second Cargo-master, which meant he had to perform all the jobs Surnal Gaemnor, the salarian Cargo-master, deemed beneath him.

Gaemnor’s dislike for the dirty or labor intensive jobs aboard the Celestial Viper became a moot point about seven months after Griff joined the crew; the salarian had never been able to keep his low opinion of humans to himself, and one night in an Omega Station bar he opened his mouth in front of a couple of human mercs that decided to teach him a lesson. Unfortunately for the salarian, his lesson involved a crushed heart and broken neck; this resulted in Buchanan becoming the lead Cargo-master on the ship.

Griff totally expected Gaemnor’s death to increase his workload on board the Viper, but as he had been doing the majority of the work under the human-hating salarian anyway, he quickly discovered he was able to get all of his work—*and* the salarian’s—completed with less effort, as he no longer had to redo some of *his* jobs just to please Gaemnor.

The ship’s owner, also the captain, didn’t care how his Cargo-master got the job done, as long as all the manifests were complete, properly filed and the correct cargo was loaded and off-loaded with minimal delay. The fact that Griff could satisfactorily handle all his duties as well as whatever tasks Surnal Gaemnor had done meant a bit more profit from each run. The salarian’s unfortunate demise wasn’t seen as a tragedy by anyone on the ship; as for Buchanan, he was actually rewarded with an increase in his compensation, receiving a fourth of the total credits that had been previously paid to the surly salarian.

Griff had attempted to live beneath the notice of officials in any of the various governments, especially the Systems Alliance; as such, he hadn’t heard from anyone he had previously worked
with—particularly Samantha Traynor, Yuán Xiùlán and General RaeLee Park; he missed working
with his former comrades, especially Traynor, but knowing they had moved on with their lives after
the termination of the Ø7 program, he felt any contact with Sammy or Xiùlán would only dredge up
bad memories for all of them.

Having spent a bit of his off-duty hours looking at his financial situation, Buchanan decided he
needed to establish a separate account for his work-related compensation; he didn’t really care to
have it mixed in with his disability pension, which was auto-deposited into an Earth-based account
on a monthly basis.

As luck would have it, the Celestial Viper’s next port of call was Milgrom, the capitol of the human
colony on Bekenstein. Captain Max Silva needed to set the ship down after it was offloaded; over
time, two of the maneuvering thruster packs on the port side of the ship’s bow had become
increasingly erratic when activated – their uneven firing had nearly caused a collision on close
approach to the much smaller transfer vessel over Eden Prime. With razor-thin profit margins, Silva
couldn’t afford any mishaps.

The Celestial Viper’s cargo of raw materials would be offloaded on the planet’s surface, near the
import/export warehouses; having the repairs done at the nearby shipyard would save time and
credits, both of which were in perpetually short supply on a small, independent freight-hauler. Once
the thruster packs were repaired or changed out with remanufactured units, they’d load their
outbound cargo of high-end manufactured goods for delivery to the station in the nearby Widow
System.

After the Viper’s cargo was unloaded and the ship moved to the nearby service facility for repairs,
Buchanan took the opportunity afforded by the unscheduled downtime to visit a human-run bank
located a few klicks from the shipyard. Here, he opened an account and established the auto-deposit
protocol that would enable his work-related compensation to be electronically transferred from the
Celestial Viper’s operating budget once each month. As he was spending so much time in deep
space, there were not many opportunities for him to spend his credits; better to simply let the money
accumulate in a safe place.

Satisfied with his choices, Griff returned to the ship—just as it was released by the shipyard—to
begin the process of overseeing the transfer of freight from the docks to the Viper’s cargo holds for
delivery to the Citadel.

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♦ BRAVO WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

After an evening spent in torrid love-making, Sammy and Xiùlán had fallen asleep in each other’s
arms. Several hours had slipped by when Traynor was awakened by her bladder’s seemingly urgent
need to be emptied. She carefully shifted the leg she had flung over her Inamorata’s bare thighs as
she slowly rolled to her right. Just as she began to sit up on the edge of the mattress, a sleepy,
slightly grumpy-sounding whisper reached her ears. “Don’t take too long, Sà mǐ … side of my body
is nice and warm … don’t want it to cool off.”

Traynor turned her head to gaze at the dark outline of Xiùlán’s form. “Dammit, Luv. It’s 0315
already. When do you have to be back to the Hong Kong?”

“0700,” came the reply. “We have time to play a bit before I need to shower and dress.”

“Don’t go anywhere … I’ll be right back.”
Traynor was dressed in the same clothes she’d worn to dinner the previous evening, having left all of her possessions—which admittedly, didn’t amount to much—in the habitat section of Iringù-Ébizkur. Xiùlán’s tone was teasing as she stated, “You really look good in girl clothes, Sà mǐ. You going to buy some more dresses, maybe a skirt?

Sammy looked down at herself before answering, “I’ll think about it, Luv. Never had any real reason to wear dresses and such while in the Navy, and after …” her voice hitched slightly at the memory, bringing Xiùlán to place a comforting hand on her upper arm. “… well, I always wore pants after that. I didn’t want people … men … to see me as attractive.” With a small chuckle, she added, “These days, any man thinking I’m a pushover has another think coming.”

Traynor gathered her lover in her arms; standing on her toes in order to reach a pair of willing lips, she applied a kiss that she hoped would tide them both over until the Hong Kong returned from its assignment. Drawing back, she studied the sable-brown eyes regarding her as she whispered, “You keep yourself safe out there, Xiùlán. Don’t make me have to come looking for an escape pod in order to rescue your ass from some miserable shithole of a planet.”

The answering grin crinkled the skin next to her eyes. “I don’t intend for that to be necessary, Sà mǐ. I’ll be back soon. A long time ago I told you my life belongs to you.” A look of concern washed over Yuán’s features as she added, “And there are no escape pods in that Reaper, darling. Bǎochí nǐ de pìgu ānquán! [保持你的屁股安全！– Keep your ass safe!] Alliance Navy won’t do a damned thing to help you if you run into trouble.”

“A fact of which I am only too well aware, Ai. [愛 - Love (Sam’s meaning is ‘luv’)] Don’t worry … I sincerely doubt I’ll need to have Irin fly anywhere for a while. I have to lay in some supplies, get myself situated, both in that apartment and inside Irin, and I need to locate Buchanan, then discover if he even wants to work with me.”

Xiùlán leaned in and applied her lips to Traynor’s once more; pulling back, she said, “Damn! I can’t believe how much I’ve missed that.” With regret shining in her eyes, she added in a grave tone of voice, “It almost feels as if I’m losing you to the war all over again, wǒ de ài. [我的愛。– my love] She forced a smile on her face and added, “Wǒ dé zòule. Nǐ ràng wǒ de rénshēng wánzhěng, Sà mǐ. [我得走了。你讓我的人生完整，薩米 – I have to go. You make my life complete, Sami.]”

Before turning to leave, she reached into a pocket of her jacket while using her free hand to grab one of Traynor’s hands; she brought her other hand out with fingers closed. Placing the objects she was holding in her Qíngrén’s open palm, she gently pressed Sammy’s fingers around a pair of shiny metal tags strung on a length of beaded chain. “Captain Cody asked me to give these back to you, Darling. He knows how upset you were … why you left these on his desk. He asked me to tell you he really considered you an asset to the ship … and the Navy, and he’s so very sorry he couldn’t think of a way for you to remain in the service.”

Sammy didn’t need to look at the objects in her hand to know what they were. Despite her best efforts, tears overflowed her lower eyelids and coursed unchecked down her cheeks. “Dammit, Xiùlán,” she sniffed. “You just had to make me cry, didn’t you?”

Xiùlán wrapped her arms around Traynor in an attempt to console her. “It really wasn’t intentional, Darling … and if you don’t straighten up, you’ll have me crying as well.”

After a few moments, Sammy pushed back a bit, kissed Yuán again and smiled at her, saying, “Zhù nǐ hǎoyùn, shàngwèi. Wǒ ài nǐ” [祝你好運，上尉，我愛你 – Good luck, Captain. I love you.]
Xiùlán released Sammy, took three steps back while trying her best to reply with a smile of her own. Nodding her head in acknowledgement, Yuán turned to begin walking towards the Hong Kong, before the thought of being forced to once again leave Traynor behind added to the moisture already in her eyes.

♦ BRAVO & DELTA WARD · AT LARGE ♦

Sammy had her Alliance issued armor and skins, along with a specially modified rifle and a heavy pistol; she also had all the routine undergarments required for a woman, but lacked the civilian equivalent of what the military referred to as casual clothing—basically, standard duty uniforms, or SDU’s—most of which she had left behind on the Normandy.

Returning to her apartment after a visit to a nearby clothing store, she made sure the civilian style pants, socks, tee-shirts and blouses all fit before laundering everything. She then dressed in her new clothes and pulled on a pair of ankle-high boots before checking her image in the mirror behind the bedroom door. She smirked at her reflection as she thought, Never thought I’d be regularly dressing in civvies again.

She left the apartment and headed to the commercial docks to check on Iringù-Eßizkur and to take a serious look at the equipment she had helped Tali’Zorah and Liara install all those months ago while they were guests within Žiuk’Durmah; Traynor needed to procure enough electronics—computer, servers and displays—that would be capable of being linked-in to the equipment installed in the Repository. She didn’t want to have to live within the Construct on a permanent basis, preferring instead to initiate her searches using the equipment inside Irin, then monitor results from her apartment.

Once inside Irin’s habitat section, she asked aloud, “Is there a place within the commercial docks where your presence will not attract undue attention?”

›I have discovered such a place, Samantha. It is closer to your new domicile; there are enough shadows and nearby buildings to significantly camouflage my presence.‹

“Would you move there now, Irin?” Traynor responded. “I’ll need to see how you look on the ground there.”

Almost before she had finished speaking, Sammy felt the touch of vertigo brought on by the Repository’s effortless lift-off, transition to forward flight, and transition back to her head-down, legs-out landing, all accomplished in absolute silence from start to finish. ›I am grounded at the new location as requested, Samantha.‹

Traynor grinned at the console where Irin’s voice originated. “Thank you, Irin. It’ll be easier for me to get here from my apartment, and dammit! I just realized I need to stock the kitchen with some food; soon as I put my new clothes away, I’ll be off again.”

Sitting in a chair facing the monitors, she inspected the two machines performing the search for Buchanan’s whereabouts. Still no results, she thought. Need to revise my search parameters. She had been searching through personnel lists from commercial passenger and freight carriers; she added open bank accounts to the criteria, then stood and stretched.

Addressing the console, she announced, “Irin, I’m going back down. I want to see how well your form blends in with your surroundings and do some more shopping.” Pausing for a few moments to think, she finally continued with, “You know how to contact me should the need arise. I’ll return soon.”
Traynor suddenly remembered her conversation with Xiùlán the previous evening and asked, “Iringù-Eßizkur, you are a space-faring construct. How would you feel about orbiting the station when we’re not actively working?”

“If that is your desire for me, I will comply, Samantha.”

Traynor blushed slightly at the slight hint of unhappiness in the tone of Irin’s response. “It is not my desire for you to remain off this station, Iringù-Eßizkur. My only concern, now that I am no longer able to access the Alliance controlled and protected docks, is that some low-ranking official with a hatred of Reapers will enact a station-wide ban to prevent you or your brethren from landing at any of the public docks – anywhere on the station.”

The Repository was silent for a number of moments. When she resumed speaking, it was in what could only be interpreted as a thoughtful tone of voice.

“Samantha, you cannot control what others on this station think of me … of us. It is to your benefit that I remain as close to your domicile on the Citadel as possible. Should circumstances require me to perform an emergency extraction to insure your survival, my presence on the station will offer you a rapid exit, whatever the reason. Response time from orbit would be considerably longer.”

Traynor smiled as she replied, “I’m just attempting to foresee possible problems in the future … you do understand, don’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, she continued, “I don’t wish for you or the others to be banned from landing on the Citadel, Irin. The longer we can avoid official notice, the better it will be for both of us.” After once again checking for results on the search for Buchanan, she said, “I’m ready to leave. If anything happens while I’m ashore, call me!”

Traynor was able to find all the electronic equipment she needed after visiting just two specialty stores; she delivered the majority of it back to her apartment and methodically set everything up. Upon powering up the monitors, she was greeted with the expected blank screens. Since she would be using the equipment installed in Iringù-Eßizkur to actually conduct data searches, she needed to add one more piece to the equipment – a special repeater that would transmit data in a tight beam at low power to the apartment.

Checking her chrono, she began moving—she still needed to buy some groceries—mostly packaged meals manufactured for Alliance military units, although she’d also be buying some frozen meals—stuff she could simply ‘nuke’ for a few minutes in order to have a hot meal. She planned to split her acquisitions, with the bulk of the frozen foods going in the freezer in her apartment.

A few hours later, Sammy had her new apartment stocked with enough frozen meals to enable her to stay inside for a week or more, should that be necessary; Liara had told her of choosing this apartment specifically for its location – for her own use and that of her agents. Traynor quickly discovered the dozen or so asari working in the ground floor offices took absolutely no notice of her trips in and out of the building, and now she actually didn’t need to walk in and out through the front door.

What she hadn’t shown Xiùlán the previous evening was the hidden access from her apartment to a small, rooftop garage that allowed the Broker—now Sammy—to utilize a deluxe X3M speeder in which she could come and go as she pleased. The entrance doors were remotely controlled from within the aircar, permitting rapid access whether leaving or arriving.

Leaving once again, this time with her grocery purchases, along with the data processor and transmitter she intended to install in the Repository, Sammy made her way to the nearby docks, there
to see how well Iringù-Eßizkur’s 197-meter high form was camouflaged by her surroundings.

Approaching the docks in her speeder, she was pleased to see the Destroyer’s form was somewhat difficult to discern as a Reaper – of any kind. The obsidian colored metal blended in with the numerous shadows and various shapes of the buildings behind which she stood, motionless as any statue.

Traynor stopped the aircar beneath the Repository’s nose, approximately centered within the 95 meter radius of the four massive supports. Unloading the equipment and food from the rear, Sammy touched a control on her omnitool and whispered, “Access.”

Sammy’s voice, encoded and transmitted through the omnitool to the audio pickups on Iringù-Eßizkur’s exterior, resulted in the silent descent of the boarding tube. Sammy had programmed her omnitool to transmit a special alpha-numerical code; when transmitted as part of her voice message—simple as one word, or a short string of words—Iringù-Eßizkur would recognize the message as legitimately originating from Sammy. Anyone else attempting to gain access to the Repository’s interior would simply be ignored.

After making two trips, Traynor carefully eased the X3M into the specially configured berth situated behind the habitat compartments; Iringù-Eßizkur had modified the space to securely contain the speeder so Sammy would have access to ground transportation wherever she needed the construct to touch down.

After putting her food—calling what she had purchased groceries seemed to give the stuff too much cachet—away in the storage compartment, she entered the research compartment; checking the status of her search for Buchanan, she was quite pleased to discover he had finally been located. Of greater interest, he was on a ship sitting in an unloading queue in a holding orbit near the docks.

Entering the ship’s name and assigned dock number into her omnitool, she told Iringù-Eßizkur the good news, saying, “We found the freighter Buchanan’s working on, Irin. I’m going to go meet the ship when it docks to unload, see if he’ll talk to me.”

> Is there any reason to believe Buchanan-Griffen will refuse to see you? <

Sammy frowned as she quickly grabbed a bite to eat, “No real reason to believe he’ll refuse to see me, but … I worry that he’ll not wish to join me … what if he simply tells me to go to ’ell? I’ll have to begin a new search for a companion, and my list of friends is exceedingly short … particularly friends not in the Alliance.” As she drank an energy drink, she thought about their missions together, particularly their assignment to uncover the how and where of the planned assassination of Raherix Ursivus.

With her cloaking shield generator clipped to her belt and a heavy pistol docked at her hip, she pulled on a newly purchased, short leather cloak.

Checking her image in the mirrored metal beside her bed, she smiled grimly as she walked back to the speeder compartment, saying, “Wish me luck.”

> I do not see … Ah! Human idiom! Very well, Samantha. I wish you good luck. <

♦ COMMERCIAL FREIGHT DOCKS, ALPHA WARD • CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Griffen Buchanan had walked out of the Celestial Viper’s main cargo hold and down the broad ramp over which a number of eezo-assisted lifts would shortly begin unloading the containers of high-end
merchandise from the colony world of Bekenstein.

Pausing at the foot of the ramp, he crouched down in order to inspect the cables holding the end of the ramp from moving around under load; he started as a voice, familiar and strange sounding at the same time, whispered his nickname. “Griff.”

Standing again to his full height, he looked about for the source; seeing no one close by, he shook his head ever so slightly, thinking maybe his ears we playing tricks on him. He had been too close to a few too many explosions in London at the end of the war, with tinnitus the inevitable result. Despite the ‘rushing air’ noise in both ears, the acuity of his hearing was still quite impressive. Turning around to walk back up the ramp, he nearly collided with a woman he’d thought to never see again.

“Samantha? Samantha Traynor!” Wrapping his arms around her, he picked her up and hugged her tight, causing her to gasp as her still healing torso protested the compression. “My God, where did you come from? You haven’t changed a bit!” Setting her back down on the ramp, he continued, “Didn’t think I’d ever see you again! What the hell you been doing since the war ended?”

She leaned over for a moment with her hands on her knees in order to take a couple of deep breaths. Slowly standing erect again, she looked up at his face as she said in a slightly wheezy voice, “Damn, Griff! Never knew you to try’n crush the life outta a friend, but it’s bloody good to see you as well!” Noticing the sudden look of concern at her breathing difficulty, she added, “Not to worry, big guy. Got caught in an explosion in Delta; still recovering from a case of blast lung … just got released to light duty.” After taking a couple more deep breaths, she asked, “Can you leave for a while, have a late lunch … or an early dinner with me? I really need to speak with you.”

Buchanan looked at her warily, saying, “Not right away, Sammy …” Waving his hand back towards the darkened hold, he explained, “I have to oversee the freight transfer off the Viper … I will have a bit of time afterwards … before we load cargo for the next port. What’s this about, Traynor? Are you in some sort of trouble?”

“No trouble, Griff. I just need to talk to you … and before you ask, it has nothing to do with the Alliance military. I’m done, Griff. I’m a private citizen, for the first time in ten years.”

Buchanan broke into a grin for a moment, only to have the suspicious frown from before return. “Aw hell, Traynor … I hope you didn’t get yourself busted for mouthing off to some spit and polish officer, or … oh, shit! You finally let General Park get under your skin, didn’t you? Got yourself court-martialed and discharged!”

“Nothing like that at all, Griff … you really think that’s what happened?” Sammy’s face darkened in irritation as she snarked, “That really hurts me, Griff … that hurts a lot!”

Buchanan’s grin returned slightly as he raised his hands, palms facing her. “Okay, okay … I’m sorry. It’s just … I know what a hothead you are when it comes to Alliance brass, so anything that happened because of something you did would not surprise me.” Seeing some dockworkers approaching the ship, he said, “Now, I really need to get our cargo unloaded. Outbound freight begins loading about 0715 tomorrow, so I’ll have time to sit and chat with you this evening. Okay?”

“Works for me, Buchanan. Meet me here.” Activating her omnitool, she sent the restaurant’s name and location to him.

♦ SMOKE HOUSE CAFÉ, DELTA WARD ♦

It had been nearly four hours since Sammy had surprised Griff at the commercial freight docks; she
was waiting for him to join her in this modest, human-centric restaurant a half-klick from the secure docks. They had enjoyed a breakfast here once before—seemed like forever, now—before the Reapers … even before Sovereign. She idly sipped tea as she stared off into the distance, mentally reliving that time in her life.

They had been planning their mission to Cartagena Station, an enclave of criminal activity deep in the Nemean Abyss; Traynor grimaced slightly at the awful memory of Xiùlán, writhing in agony on the metal deck after taking a polonium-coated round point-blank in her left thigh. Traynor had paid the batarian that shot her by taking his life in the most painful way she could think of. Not the most painful way I could think of – I didn’t gut ‘im with my blades while he was still breathing. Her thoughts were interrupted by a shadow falling across the table.

“Seems to me we’ve eaten at this place once before, Sammy.”

Snapping back to the present, she looked up at the slanted, greenish-gray eyes regarding her, the handsome face bearing only a faint hint of the knife scar he had possessed back then. “Buchanan! I’m glad you could join me … come, have a seat.”

Pulling out the chair across from her, he sat down with a sigh and remarked, “Last time we were here, we were getting ready for a visit to the gates of hell.”

Sammy smiled grimly as she agreed with him. “I was just thinking about that mission, Griff. Seems we went through those bloody gates and came out the other side. Xiùlán still has scars on her leg as souvenirs. I’d bet you still have a few as well.”

“Yeah, let’s not go there, okay?” he replied, a touch of red coloring his cheeks. “That’s all in the past … best to leave it there.” He looked up as a waitress appeared with the cup of coffee he’d ordered before greeting Traynor. After taking a sip, he sighed again, with pleasure this time. “When you’re on a ship for any length of time, you get used to the bad coffee, to the point you don’t notice just how bad it really tastes.” Taking another sip, he concluded, “This … is good coffee.” After a few moments of silence, he asked, “You going to tell me why I’m here now, or wait until after we eat?”

Finishing her cup of tea, Sammy responded, “I’ll tell you while we eat, if that’s okay by you.” Catching the attention of the waitress, she nodded at Griff as the petite woman walked up to stand beside the table. “I’m told the roast beef and potatoes dinner is really good … all the ingredients are brought in from Eden Prime, or so they say.”

Griff nodded as he placed his order; Traynor had already placed hers and had simply been waiting for Griff to arrive. When they were alone again, Griff looked at Sammy with one eyebrow raised in curiosity.

“I need your help, Griff,” she began in a low voice. After a few moments, she continued, “I have … just recently … gained exclusive access to what many people in the galaxy consider the most powerful information gathering network ever developed. It’s the reason I resigned from the Alliance. My captain on the Normandy … and Admiral Hackett … thought I should volunteer for the job.” After a pause to collect her thoughts, she whispered, “I’m taking over as the new Shadow Broker, Griff,” before launching into a recounting of the recent history of an asari she did not name, and how all her equipment had been removed from its previous location and installed inside a Destroyer-class Reaper while they traveled back from the galactic rim inside a Nazara-class Reaper.

As they finished their meals, Buchanan peppered her with numerous questions, which Traynor answered honestly, even if some of her answers seemed to lessen the chances that Griff would be
willing to join her. “I don’t pretend to know how this will work out, Griff … it’s all new to me. I just know I need someone to help me rebuild the network of agents … someone I trust on my six … trust with my life.” Pushing her plate away, she added, “Come with me, Griff … See for yourself. We’ve lived together in cramped quarters before … remember Spirit’s Rage?”

The reminder of their shared time on the decidedly cramped, former turian corvette caused Griff to chuckle. “Trying to work around each other – sleeping one above the other in those tiny bunks.” With a grimace, he said, “I still have trouble finding a bed aboard a ship that’s big enough for me to sleep in comfortably.”

“This will be different, Griff. We’ll have separate sleeping compartments inside Iringù-Eßizkur, and my apartment has two private bedrooms – plenty of space for each of us to feel comfortable.” She grinned cheekily as she added, “Although, it’s not as if I haven’t seen you … ah … out of uniform before, is it?”

Buchanan grimaced at the memory. “You got a closer look than almost anyone ever has, with the exception of the nice doctor on that asari corvette … what was its name? The Ionsaí, that was it.” Shaking his head, he muttered, “Fucking batarians.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that bloody station, Griff, but yeah, I did get a close look … two, in fact.” She frowned slightly at the memories, adding, “Experiences I really don’t care to repeat. So, shouldn’t be a problem for us living together, should it?”

“We were soldiers back then, Traynor … but yeah. No problem, not even now. Let’s get out of here so I can see what you’re talking about.”

After Sammy paid the bill for their meals and drinks, she led the way to her speeder. “We can go to my apartment first.”

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**BRAVO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM**

Sammy led Buchanan down the circular stairs from the rooftop parking garage to her apartment, saying, “Here we are.” After showing Griff the bedrooms, bath and kitchen, he nodded in approval.

“Very nice, but … I can’t imagine the rent for this place is cheap.”

Traynor replied, “Rent free, Griff. Bought and paid for by the previous Shadow Broker, as was the X3M. And that elevator …” she said, pointing to the car exposed by the open doors, “… is a private conveyance for the exclusive use of the Shadow Broker. It’s locked out from ground floor access anytime the Broker is up here, and after it’s been used the pass codes for the two Haptic interface lockouts automatically change … the algorithm is programmed into my omnitool.”

“I’m not seeing any windows. What if the power gets cut?”

“Lack of windows up here makes the building look like a warehouse from the ground.”

Triggering her omnitool, she made two entries and pressed a control, resulting in the activation of a large, wall-mounted monitor with its display sectioned into ten zones. Griff noted that six zones appeared to each present a different view around the building; the other four were duplicate views, but gave the impression of infrared imagery.

Traynor explained, “There are cameras all ‘round, camouflaged by the overhang of the parapet. I can choose the view from any camera and …” here she had the lower left section zoom to take over most of the screen, “… take a closer look at what’s happening.” Restoring the view to its previous
configuration, she added, “The system passively monitors everything around here, and self-activates the monitor if anything out of the ordinary is detected. The power for the elevator and entire apartment is on a separate, isolated circuit; the current can only be interrupted by going through a Keeper access tunnel.”

Buchanan looked around a bit more before observing, “Not much in the way of personal gear in here, Sammy, and not many clothes hanging in your closet … but I see you actually have a dress!” Smiling, he added, “Seems I’ll need to revise my opinion of you, Traynor. Hard to imagine you wearing girl clothes. So, all your fighting gear stored on the Reap … er, Repository?”

“So far. Cap’n let me keep my armor, since it’s a custom fit. I kept my rifle, shotgun and heavy pistol. I still have to acquire some more clothing, since I no longer have my SDU’s. You want to go over there, meet Iringû-Èêzkur?” Thinking, _If he’s gonna balk at all this, going inside a Reaper will be the trigger._

Buchanan turned to look directly at her. “Sure. May as well have the whole tour … see what kind of trouble you’re trying to get me into.”
The Beginning of Forever

It was a gentle love, a tactile love. It was all hands and lips and hearts in tandem. There was motion in our bodies and emotion in our discourse. We were a symphony of melody and melancholy. When you find peace in another’s presence, there is no mistaken. — Lang Leav, The Universe of Us

GST – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

Ionúin álainn – Beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Irín – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-EB’izkur’

Liǔyè dāo – literally, a willow leaf saber; military sidearm for cavalry and infantry during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. It weighs from 0.9 to 1.3 Kg, and is 91 to 99 Cm. long.

Mo cheann geallta – My promised one (Gaelic)

Nángùn – literally, a ‘southern staff’, polished, two-meter long white wax wooden staff

Qíngrén – [情人 – lover]

♦ SSV NORMANDY SR-2 · ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

Having been cleared for light duty by Dr Chakwas, Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton checked in with Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez as soon as she was back aboard the Normandy – he had enthusiastically welcomed her return, telling her how much he and the crew had missed her. Cortez assigned her to complete the inventory of all the light weapons—pistols, shotguns, assault rifles and such—she had begun right after her promotion at the beginning of the year. “I realize this project is probably pretty tame compared to your recent mission ashore, but I don’t expect you’ll have battarians trying to kill you … shouldn’t have to outrun any explosions, either.”

Patton chuckled at that. “I could certainly use a boring project or two after my recent adventures in Delta Ward, Sir. Updating our light weapons inventory and operational readiness will be all the excitement I need for the near future.”

“Well, I’m sure I can uncover another really boring project or two by the time you’ve got this one completed, Master Guns,” he replied with a smile bordering on a smirk. “Welcome back aboard.”

After meeting with all the Marines assigned to the Normandy, Patton had spent several quiet afternoons in the armory area on the port side of the hanger bay, logging all their small arms by manufacturer, type and condition. As Cerberus had never done an inventory of the ship’s weapons and there hadn’t been enough Alliance personnel onboard to fill all the available positions during the Reaper war, Sandra was able to do a ‘clean’ inventory. Not surprisingly, there were many weapons on the ship of which only a single example existed; the lack of any standardized process for procuring guns during the fight to eliminate the Collectors, or afterwards in the war against the Reapers, meant the crew possessed a fair number of small arms that were not in compliance with Alliance regulations for ground team hardware. Every manufacturer in the galaxy was represented in the collection, including Batarian State Arms.

Ground teams routinely confiscated weapons from fallen enemies, the majority of which had
belonged to Cerberus soldiers or members of the ‘big three’ merc gangs.

Since every soldier on the ship had been issued an N7 Valkyrie assault rifle upon enlistment, Cortez wanted the remainder of the ship’s weapons standardized, not only to reduce maintenance time and expenses, but also to insure the training everyone received was centered on identical weaponry. The Marines seemed a bit more troubled by this development than the Navy crew members on board, but each of them respected Patton’s position on the ship, particularly since her successful assignment on the Citadel.

Corporal Vic, assisting Patton in listing all the non-standard weaponry on board, made sure to inform the more vociferous protesters among the Marines that Patton would be retiring her personal Jörmangund Technology Helix-10 Rifle in favor of an Alliance manufactured Black Widow rifle, a weapon Sandee privately felt was inferior to her Helix-10 due to its greater weight. As she didn’t own a pistol or shotgun, her choices would depend on her fighting style. Previous to her transfer and promotion, Patton had always been assigned to an overwatch position, serving as a squad’s sniper; as she would now be expected to occasionally lead ground squads, she needed to carry a couple of additional weapons.

After researching what was available from Alliance manufacturers and allies, she chose to restrict heavy pistol inventory to the M-5 Phalanx or M-6 Carnifex, the shotgun inventory to either the N7 Crusader or N7 Piranha, and the assault rifle inventory to the Alliance approved and issued N7 Valkyrie. Patton’s sniper background had her favoring the slower firing M-6 for a pistol; while the fully-automatic Piranha appealed to her sense of having a close-range weapon that could literally be used as an alley-broom, she decided to stick with the N7 Crusader she had employed so successfully during her recent assault of the Blue Suns Headquarters in Delta.

In short order, Patton had replacement weapons in the hands of the Normandy’s Marine contingent and had them running drills and firing live rounds in the nearby practice arena. Unable to join in the exercises due to her light-duty restriction, she contented herself with patrolling the sidelines, voicing encouragement over the comms loud enough to be understood over the nearly unceasing sounds of weapons fire.

During a break in the exercises, she walked into the nearby field office to answer a page on her omni-tool. Pulling up the message, she was a bit surprised by the identity of the sender; Zaeed Massani wanted to speak with her … over dinner, at a nearby restaurant. Thinking back to the day she had literally thrown herself at him, only to have her attempt to tell him of her feelings rebuffed, Sandra’s initial impulse was to simply say ‘no fuckin’ way!’ However, she couldn’t bring herself to do that to the man. At the time, she had told Zaeed that she wouldn’t turn her back on him; she’d be damned if she was going to go back on her word now.

In spite of thinking herself crazy to do so, she sent an acknowledgement, saying she would meet him for dinner. The thought struck her that maybe, just maybe, there’d be private time afterwards for something a bit more … physical. Damn! I really wish I was completely healed and free of light-duty restrictions! Who knows what might happen after dinner … With a heavy sigh, she closed her omni-tool and headed back out to the arena to observe the end of the live-fire exercises.

♦ BRAVO WARD · CITADEL ♦

Traynor slowed the X3M as she brought the speeder closer to her destination; she had signaled Iringù-Eßizkur to prepare for her arrival by activating her homing beacon. As soon as the navicomputer in her speeder acquired the Repository’s beacon signal, Samy released the controls and sat back in her seat, somewhat to Buchanan’s dismay. “Dammit Sammy, are you doing what I think
Traynor interrupted him, saying, “It’ll be fine, Griff. Just relax. Iringū-Eßizkur has just enough space available for this aircar, and she has much more accurate control.”

Buchanan shook his head slightly in disbelief as he watched the rear underside of the Destroyer draw steadily closer. He nearly lost it when he saw an entry that seemed no larger than 9 meters long by 6 wide – a space he considered a rather paltry-sized opening. “Doesn’t seem large enough, Sammy – this thing is a good 8 meters long.”

“Seven and a half, actually. Oh, and the canopy has been modified to slide forward enough so we can simply climb out once we’re inside … be patient, Griff.”

When the speeder’s forward travel transitioned to vertical motion beneath the Repository, several low-intensity lights came on to illuminate their parking area. As they cleared the lower edge of the opening, a pair of panels rapidly swung closed beneath them; the computer cut the power and the X3M settled onto the now tightly-closed and latched door panels beneath it. Sammy toggled the canopy open and stepped out, motioning for Griff to follow her. “I kinda wish there was enough room in here to dock our old UT-47, but Irin’s eezo core and the circuitry for her prime weapon take a helllova lot of space. She actually surprised me with the ability to safely store a speeder.”

A round hatch irised open at the forward end of the compartment, prompting Sammy to encourage the reluctant man along. “Come on – I think you’ll like her, Griff.”

Buchanan muttered, “Wish you’d quit referring to this thing as a ‘she’.”

“What other pronoun would you have Samantha use to refer to me?”

Sammy looked at Griff and smirked as she led him up to the outer compartment. “Pay Griff no mind, Irin. I don’t think he’s ever been near a Repository, let alone inside one.”

“Oh, I’ve been a lot closer to the damned things than I ever wanted to be … it’s how I got injured at the end of the war.” As the entrance hatch to the habitat and broker compartment segments irised open, the sounds of music—incredibly ancient in origin—resumed playing at a low volume. “My God, Traynor … What the hell is that? I’ve never heard anything like it!”

Sammy turned to look at Griff. “Not surprising. The majority of the civilization harvested by this Repository was gender female; they were an educated and cultured people, with enough leisure time to create …” she raised her hands over her head to indicate the sounds coming from the hidden speakers, “… this music. It’s over 3500 centuries old.” Before he could reply, she moved to the small console at the edge of the Broker’s compartment and said, “Irin, this is Griffen Buchanan, the gentleman I told you about.”

The music continued to play a cheerful melody as Iringū-Eßizkur replied, “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Buchanan-Griffen.”

“IT’s joking, right? It’s a machine, Traynor. How can it feel pleasure about … anything?”

Traynor’s mouth fell open in shocked disapproval. “Griff, the Reapers were fully sentient, intelligent machines when they rolled in through Kite’s Nest! Commander Shepard freed them from their imperative to indoctrinate organics; by so doing, she imbued all of them with a bit of her own DNA.” She held two fingers up in a ‘vee’, pointing to her eyes. “Your eyes glow in the dark, as do mine – that’s a result of their nanites being grafted onto our DNA. It’s one reason our injuries seem to heal so much faster than before.” Stepping further into the compartment, she added, “The only
imperative Iringù-Eßizkur—hell, all of them—obeys now is to help organics … us! Xiùlán has a Destroyer named Asharru shadowing the Hong Kong everywhere she takes the ship. Others are repairing the relays and planetary infrastructure, even as we speak.”

By now, Griff was holding up his hands in an attempt to get her to stop talking. “Okay! Okay, Sammy … I’m sorry … but you have to admit, all of this is really just a bit much.” He looked around and added, “I think I need to sit down for a few.”

Traynor motioned for him to follow her. “Let me show you the lounge, Griff.”

Following on Sammys’ heels, Buchanan’s eyes widened in wonder at the comfortable looking chairs arranged along one bulkhead, all facing what appeared to be a large monitor on the opposite side. Sitting in the chair closest to the entrance, he relaxed slightly as he stared at the blank screen. He noticed the pair of chronometers beneath the display … the one installed at the left showing current GST, while the one mounted to the right presented a row of paired zeros with colons between each pair.

Sammy stood beside Griff; with a hand on his shoulder she explained, “The chronometer that’s ‘zeroed’ is the ‘time-to-destination’ display. The monitor above displays real-time views of the space environment, whether ahead, behind, or both simultaneously. It can also serve as a tactical display.” Pointing to the sides of the compartment, she added, “Personal spaces are on either side of this area – yours will be on the left, or port side; the dining area and kitchen are straight ahead through that hatch.”

Griff turned his head to look up at her. “You seem pretty damned sure I’m going to join you … work for you …”

Sammy interrupted with, “… Not for me, Griff … you’d be working with me. There’s a huge difference … and, I realize I’m asking a lot … asking you to have faith in me. But I honestly believe we can do this … rebuild the network of agents, find and broker valuable information … the need is greater now, more than ever.” She went on to explain how she had helped Captain Cody and Zaeed Massani, with Sandra Patton’s assistance, by flushing Solem Dal’Serah from hiding, thus enabling Zaeed to track him to Vido Santiago’s hiding place, using information uncovered with the equipment installed inside Iringù-Eßizkur. “It’s how I wound up in hospital along with Sandee, the NCO in charge of Normandy’s Weapons Systems Division. We cleaned out a nest full of batarians …” she paused as Buchanan held up his hand.

“Sammy,” he said in a resigned voice. “I get it. Captain Bill Cody is hell-bent on taking out the Blue Suns, and it would seem the Alliance in on board with that goal. That you were able to use …” he raised his hands to indicate Iringù-Eßizkur, “… the equipment inside this black metal monster to track down the head honchos of the Suns is all the proof I need that you’re dead serious about doing this. Well, that … and the fact you resigned from the Alliance.”

As he paused, Iringù-Eßizkur interrupted with, ›I am not a monster, Buchanan-Griffen.‹

Buchanan chuckled. “A bit sensitive for a machine, aren’t you?”

Sammy chimed in, saying, “Irin, I don’t think Griff will be convinced during such a short visit.” Turning her attention to Buchanan, she said, “I don’t need an answer right away, Griff, but I do need to know your intentions within the next few days.” Her expression turned contemplative as she continued, “I’ll understand if you don’t wish to work with me again, especially since we would have to fend for ourselves without any military backup.”

When Buchanan fell into a prolonged, brooding silence, Sammy walked through the hatchway to the
dining/kitchen compartment, opened the cooler and grabbed a couple of beers. Moving back into the lounge, she handed one to Griff, who murmured his gratitude before opening and taking a long pull from the bottle.

After a few more silent moments and a couple more swallows of beer, he produced a loud belch before standing. “Sammy, I should probably be getting back to the *Celestial Viper*. I have to oversee the loading for our next delivery, soon as I get a good night’s sleep.”

Sammy took a couple of swallows from her own bottle before replying. “Griff, do me a favor … sleep here tonight. I’ll wager you’ll get a better night’s sleep here, in this Repository, than on the *Viper.*” Pointing to the left side of the compartment, she added, “Take a look. The bed is extra-long – a custom size, made for a turian. You’re probably just as tall, even if you are a bit wider.”

Buchanan grimaced, polished off his beer, then moved to inspect the sleeping area. After several minutes, he reappeared in the hatchway, his voice carrying a touch of awed surprise as he commented, “You weren’t exaggerating about that bed, Sammy. Bathroom’s a bit tight, but I’m used to that. So, we wouldn’t have to bunk together, or share a bathroom … but … well, I’m still not sure.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I probably should get back to my ship for the evening, Sammy. I want to think about everything you’ve told me before I make a decision, and there’s something about the way this thing is laid out … seems like the angles and surfaces are all out of kilter.”

Traynor placed her hands on her hips and replied with a sigh of resignation, “Okay then. Come on … I’ll give you a ride.” Picking up the empty bottles, she dropped them into a recycling tube before walking back towards the rear section with Buchanan following. Once they were both in the speeder, Sammy activated the drive core and brought the craft to a hover as Iringù-Eßizkur opened the doors beneath them; she let the craft descend from the small compartment, then deftly spun it around and headed for the freight docks in Alpha Arm.

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Traynor was slowly awakened by the soft, insistent chiming of her omnitool. She sat on the edge of the bed for a few moments as she stretched; with a small groan, she got up and padded to the bathroom, there to relieve herself and splash a bit of water on her face. Moving back to stand beside her bed, she pulled on a pair of knee length exercise shorts, socks and training shoes, traded her sleep shirt for a sports bra, then stretched several times by reaching both arms towards the overhead, followed by bending at the waist to wrap her hands around her ankles.

After stretching upwards once more, Sammy performed her deep breathing exercises before beginning the Tai Chi movements she had learned from Xiüßán when they were still in school together … *seems so long ago*, she thought as she cleared her mind to concentrate. Wincing as a couple of the positions she undertook brought a touch of discomfort from her still-healing injuries, she doggedly continued on, realizing she had to work through minor pain if she wanted to completely heal from her Blue Suns adventure.

After completing two reps of her seemingly choreographed movements, she added in her nángùn, twirling the wooden shaft in front of her and jabbing imaginary opponents with the ends; after two reps of her nine-step exercise, she set her staff aside in order to pull her Liǔyè dāo from its wooden scabbard and add it to her workout. The whistling sound of its razor sharp blade parting the air around her punctuated her rapid arm movements and jumping pirouettes. After fifteen minutes of swinging the flexible blade, she sank to her knees to catch her breath for a few moments.

After returning her weapons—nángùn to a pair of hooks on the bulkhead and her Liǔyè dāo to its
ornate wooden scabbard—she shed her workout wear, took a shower and dressed, leaving her still-damp hair to finish drying on its own. She made breakfast for herself, then ate as she skimmed through the news feeds displayed on the table-top terminal. Seeing nothing noteworthy, she finished her meal, downed her tea and cleaned up.

Sammy left her apartment through the elevator, choosing to walk to the several shops she intended to visit in order to obtain the components for the upgraded terminals she needed to assemble. In only a few hours, she had everything she needed and was on her way back to the apartment when her omnitool chimed to indicate an incoming message. It was from Buchanan. Thinking, *Shit! That was awfully damned quick,* she hurried to reach the entrance to her building; once inside, she set her packages down and keyed on her omnitool. The message was short: *Traynor. I'm at the freight docks and need a ride. Buchanan.*

She smiled with satisfaction as she sent an acknowledgement; she had hoped to hear from Griff before the end of the day, and it wasn’t even mid-morning. After taking the private lift to her apartment, she set her acquisitions on the table in the dining area before taking the circular staircase to the rooftop shelter where her speeder was parked.

It was only a twenty-minute flight to the freight docks in Bravo Ward; gazing down as she flew overhead, she tried but failed to find the *Celestial Viper* among the many Kowloon Class vessels in port. Circling back, she set her speeder's locator receiver to the specific frequency of Buchanan's omnitool; she had loaded and saved his ident-code years ago, so was actually surprised when she was rewarded almost immediately with a signal that was unmistakably from Griff.

A bit disturbed that he had never thought to change it after all they had been through while working for General Park, Traynor slaved the X3M's flight controls to the signal, enabling the speeder to fly directly to Griff's location on an empty dock.

Upon landing several meters from the big fellow, she slid the canopy forward and stood as the small engine spooled down to an idle.

“Looks as if your ship left without you, Griff,” she said with a chuckle as he picked up his packs and began walking towards her.

As he closed the gap, he grinned and replied, “Damn, Sammy! That’s a pretty accurate observation. You really have this info gathering business down cold.” He tossed his packs into the rear of the passenger compartment as he met Traynor's gaze, their eyes level due to her standing in the speeder’s front compartment.

“I didn’t think I’d hear back from you until tonight,” she said. “What happened?”

Griff chuckled again as he climbed into the speeder; as he sat down beside her, Sammy retook her seat and reengaged the small mass effect core and propulsion system while the canopy slid closed and latched over their heads. “Seems the *Celestial Viper’s* captain found a salarian that would take over my cargo-master position for half of what I was being paid, so he invoked a clause in my contract, paid me what I was owed plus a small severance, then left without me.” Another small chuckle, then, “Guess loyalty doesn’t count for much these days.”

“His loss is definitely my gain, if you’re planning on joining me,” she grinned. “You think you can get used to flying around in a Reaper turned Repository?”

Buchanan settled back in his seat as the speeder headed back for Delta Ward. “No … at least, not immediately. Those things did massive amounts of damage, Sammy … galaxy wide. It’s still difficult for me, even knowing they’re the reason that Commander Shepard walks among us again.”
Traynor glanced at her companion as she replied in a soft voice, “She’s on Thessia, joining in a matrimonial bond with Liara T’Soni.” She shook her head as if still in disbelief at the recent turn of events. “Dr T’Soni has left all the equipment and properties she used as an information broker on Illium for me … for us … to use. Iringù-Eßizkur has assured me she will be as faithful to me as she was to Dr T’Soni during her hunt for Cerberus assets after the Normandy returned from the far rim.”

Griff was silent for several minutes. Finally speaking as they crossed the Presidium Ring on their way to Traynor’s apartment, he hesitantly voiced another doubt. “You know, Sammy … it just struck me that a person of your talents, having access to the specialized equipment aboard Iringù-Eßizkur, could have quite easily engineered that salarian’s offer to steal my job on the Viper.”

Sammy looked at Buchanan in amazement. When he remained silent, she calmly replied, “Griff, if you think that I would do such a thing to you, after all the time we spent together on missions, then this partnership is never going to work. I used my equipment to locate you … to locate the ship that employed you, and that’s all I did.”

She returned her gaze outside as the speeder began slowing for a landing. “I’ll admit, I could have easily sabotaged your job on that freighter in the meager hope that you would join me out of … I don’t know … desperation? I didn’t … the thought never even occurred to me.”

She shook her head as the X3M settled into the rooftop shelter. “Griff, look at me.” When he reluctantly turned his greenish-grey eyes towards her, she fixed him with an intense stare. “I need to know, right now, before you get out of this speeder, what’s it going to be? You gonna work with me?” Pausing for a moment, the scowling stare on her face intensified as she asked, “Are you in, or out … a hundred percent … or nothing.”

Buchanan could feel the heat rising from inside his collar and crawling up his neck as he looked down and away in embarrassed silence. Her continued silent calm compelled him to look at her once again. “Traynor, I’m sorry. I should know better, and I apologize for even thinking you might have had a hand in me losing my job.” He hesitantly reached over, offering his right hand. “You’ve always been straight up with me … hell, you saved my life on Cartagena Station, so yeah … I’m in a hundred percent … whatever you need me to do.”

Sammy smiled as she gripped his hand and pumped it twice. “Good to know. Let’s get downstairs, maybe grab a bite to eat. I have some components to assemble and test, then there’s software upgrades to the equipment inside Iringù-Eßizkur. Lots to do.” She climbed out of the speeder, insured the main entry door was latched and locked, then unlocked the stairwell and started down, followed by a resigned Buchanan.

Once they entered the apartment and Traynor locked the door behind them, Griff met her eyes. “Alright. If I’m doing this, we need to sit down for a bit; you need to fill me in on everything … and I do mean everything. I need to see the system, learn how it works, and what, exactly, you expect our partnership to yield … and where I fit into the whole thing.” He dipped his head in embarrassment as he continued in a subdued voice, “I’m not who I was, Sammy. I’m not physically able to run ops anymore … I’d just get us both killed.”

Traynor looked at him in silence for a moment and he relaxed a little after seeing no pity in her eyes. He felt even better about the deal as she responded, “I nearly died during my last op, Griff; I have no intention of either of us being field operatives, ever again. My initial idea was for me to become the information director and for you to direct the military ops, but we’re partners, so nothing’s set in stone. There are Broker teams out there, simply waiting for new instructions. Our first job will be to get the network fully up and operational … then, we find customers and put the teams to work gathering info we can sell. Simple as that.”
“You make it sound easy.” Griff looked at her skeptically. “But I know it won’t be.”

Traynor grinned at that. “But it’s not that difficult either, because T’Soni already did all the hard work. We just have to step in and pick it back up like she did after she and Shepard killed the previous Broker.”

“And, I assume, our job will be easier because T’Soni is still alive … and willing to help in the transition, I hope?” Griff raised an eyebrow and, for the first time, the start of a smile began to creep onto his face.

A hopeful Traynor smiled in return, offering up a light chuckle before answering, “Yes, she is … but she has a bonding and a honeymoon to enjoy first.”

Beginning to feel cautiously optimistic, Buchanan nodded in acceptance and his demeanor brightened as he stated. “Alright. Not like we’ll be ready to go anytime soon, anyway. Seems I’ve got a lot to learn, so how about we get started?”

Traynor grinned. “Alright then … partner. Let’s start by showing you your quarters; you can stow your gear … and we can begin our lives as the new Shadow Broker. Right this way, Agent Buchanan.”

♦

T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Shepard had awakened slowly. It was liberating to have no real demands on her time … to simply be able to live at a more leisurely pace. Having nightly full-body contact with the blue goddess that had utterly captured her heart certainly contributed to Rachaél’s sense of peace. She tipped her head slightly, relishing the captivating scent of Thessian Rose and eezo before placing a soft kiss on a pebbled forehead, smiling as the asari stirred slightly in reaction.

A contented sigh accompanied a dreamy stretch; Liara tilted her own head in order to place her lips on her siame’s neck just under her jaw before whispering, “Good morning, Rachaél. How did you sleep?”

“I might ask the same of you, Mo cheann geallta … but I believe I know the answer.”

The quiet chuckle she received in reply swelled her heart such that she took a deep, calming breath before once again applying her lips to the pebbled skin, this time to the top of her crests as she brought her right hand up to caress a bare shoulder. “I know we have to meet with the matriarchs in order to receive their blessing for our proposed union; what will happen if they don’t approve of me, Blue?”

“After everything you have done? After all the pain you endured … with everyone, including the council, questioning and doubting your motivation … your actions? After enduring months trapped in the Normandy’s computer core?”

Liara roused herself so she could look directly in the ocean-green eyes of her future life-partner. “If that bunch even hints at denying us their blessing …” She left the thought unfinished, as there was simply no alternative. If they could not gain the matriarchs approval, the children Liara might conceive with Shepard would not be permitted to lay claim to any of the T’Soni properties or holdings. As the only living heir of Benezia T’Soni, if Liara were to die without having children from an approved bonding, the entire T’Soni estate would revert to government ownership.

Rachaél grinned as she placed a light kiss on a freckled nose. “I’ll speak with Aethyta. She had to
deal with all the political crap when your mother kicked her out of her life. I can’t imagine how she managed to survive that kind of betrayal, but survive she did.” Placing a soft kiss on blue eyelids, Rachaël concluded, “She must have some friends on that council. They didn’t hesitate to use her to keep you under surveillance on Ilium and on the Citadel, so I’m sure she’ll have an opinion on who among them will be on our side in all this.”

♦ ARMALI COUNCIL CHAMBERS, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Rachaël Shepard had been asked to appear before the governing council of the Thessian Republic in order for them to ascertain the seriousness of her desire to bond with the sole heir of House T’Soni. As a future member of the ruling council—and possibly the Defense Committee—Liara was not allowed to provide testimony defending her choice of a mate; they were solely interested in this human’s desire to join one of the most influential houses on the planet.

Most of them were only too well aware of Shepard’s achievements before and during the Reaper War, but few had known of her ultimate sacrifice to end that war. There were several protests at accepting that Shepard had been resurrected not once … by Cerberus, no less, in order to fight the Collector menace, but a second time … through the combined efforts of the Reaper Harbinger and the employment of a cloned body. Several viable clones had been discovered in storage at a former Cerberus space station; the samples used to grow them had been taken from Shepard’s own body during her time on a Cerberus operating table.

Rachaël’s answers to their questions were most eloquent, but what had ultimately swayed the ruling council to approve Shepard’s petition to join with Liara was her declared willingness to have a Justicar perform a memory meld in order to verify she was who she claimed to be. As it was Shepard that had volunteered to do this, she invoked her right—her privilege—to choose the Justicar for the invasive procedure. There were more than a few disbelievers among the council whose opinions were changed when the identity of the Justicar was revealed.

It was Justicar Samara that confirmed for the ruling council that not only was the human presenting herself as Rachaël Shepard the genuine article, but that she held no ulterior motive in her desire to become Liara T’Soni’s bondmate. Samara stated under oath and in no uncertain terms that Shepard’s entire reason—her only reason—for wanting to spend the rest of her life with Liara was the human’s unwavering love and devotion to the leader of House T’Soni.

The additional testimony provided by the late Benezia T’Soni’s surviving bondmate—and Liara’s father—Matriarch Aethyta Beuss, along with some additional input from Citadel Councilor Raesia Tevos, convinced the few holdouts among the ruling Matriarchs to grant an official right of joining to Rachaël Shepard and Liara T’Soni, with all the benefits such a union would produce, including the rights of inheritance for any children produced from their union.

With the blessings received from the council, the only thing left was the actual ceremony.

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, THESSIA · ATHENA NEBULA ♦

As Lady Liara T’Soni stood at Shepard’s side before the Priestess, she was relieved she had insisted on not having their formal bonding ceremony at the Temple of Athame in Serrice. The last thing either she or Shepard needed was to be reminded of their last ‘visit’ there during the Reaper War. Of all the events they had survived, their crushing defeat at the hands of Kai Leng and Cerberus inside the temple had reduced their chance at victory to its slimmest margin since Shepard’s death over Alchera. Liara shuddered as that unwelcome memory intruded once more into her mind.
To justify the exception, Liara had been compelled to recount the entire story to the temple’s High Priestess. She explained everything that had happened from their landing on Thessia, overrun by Reapers and their corrupted agents, through the ultimate sacrifice made by so many scientists, acolytes and commandos, simply to ensure she and Rachaël made it to the temple. The final argument was how it had been all for naught after the final battle with Kai Leng, who—aided by covering fire and missiles from an A-61 gunship—had escaped with the Prothean VI and left Rachaël and herself virtually bereft of all hope.

Now, she was able to unceremoniously cast the horrible memory from her mind, simply by turning her head and taking in the visage of the precious woman who stood at her side. Spectre Shepard was arrayed in her dress uniform, something Liara had never seen her wear until they began to discuss the apparel for the formal bonding. It was very similar to her Alliance dress uniform, only the jacket was the Spectre silver and the trousers a midnight blue so dark they appeared black to an observer’s casual glance.

She smiled at the memory of the first time Shepard modeled it for her, simply so Liara could see how she looked wearing it. “You cut quite the dashing figure in that, Rachaël … and you say it is customary for officers to wear their dress uniform at human weddings? You absolutely must wear this for our bonding!”

Liara had seen the weak protest forming on Rachaël’s lips until the asari’s final statement. Hearing that, the Spectre had simply finished fastening the topmost clasp and smiled softly. “If that’s what you want, Liara, that’s what you’ll get … but, you’ll need to procure a matching dress to go with it.’

She had clapped in childish glee and thanked Shepard for indulging her, knowing a silver gown with midnight blue piping would be relatively easy to have made … certainly soon enough for the bonding ceremony on Thessia.

All the memories, both good and bad, passed through her mind in mere moments as the Priestess activated their bonding bracelets, temporarily linking them together, physically, as one. The time had come for their long awaited union to become official; they had promised themselves to one another long ago, the announcement of which, surprisingly, had been accepted by Liara’s father, Aethyta, without honest protest. Now, all the preliminaries were complete – so, the final vows would be spoken and the activated bonding bracelets placed upon their wrists. Neither Liara nor Shepard could keep from smiling as the final portion of the ceremony began.

“As the Tides have been for centuries, the Tides shall always be. As the tide of your Love has grown, the tide of your Love shall always be strong, forever lapping at the universe’s shores of Eternity.” The Priestess of Athame smiled at the young couple before her and reached out, taking a hand from each of them in her own. She focused on Liara as she continued, “Lady Liara T’Soni. Will you give your heart, your mind, and your soul, so that you and Spectre Rachaël Shepard may be as one under the Goddess Athame?”

Liara’s glistening blue eyes moved from the Priestess to her beloved as she eagerly stated, “By every known interpretation of the word, Rachaël Shepard is my siame, the one I will always cherish above all others. There is no other with whom I would be one.” She paused, took a deep breath, and looked back to the Priestess, answering simply, “I will.”

The Priestess nodded and turned to Liara’s Promised. “Will you, Spectre Rachaël Shepard, join Lady Liara T’Soni in Eternity, so your hearts shall beat as one, your love shall ride the waves to the ends of the Thessian seas, and your souls shall rise amongst the stars until your essential essence returns to the universe?”

Shepard tumbled into Liara’s eyes, lost for a moment in the unbridled passion and adoration she saw
there. Rachael had to close her eyes and break the connection for an instant to get the words in her mind to make their way to her lips. “Liara is mo cheann geallta, my promised one, and the grá mo chroí, the love of my heart.” She opened her eyes once more, causing Liara to inhale sharply at the emerald fire she saw within as Rachael said, “There is no other with whom I would be one.” She nodded gently in affirmation of her lover’s reaction before turning to the Priestess to say, “I will.”

“Then with the promise of a blessing of your union by the Goddess Athame …” She withdrew her hands and picked up the activated bracelets, holding them before the duo. As they slid their hands through the circlets, the Priestess’ hands glowed with biotics and the bracelets slowly shrank in size until they fit each wrist perfectly. She continued softly, “… the bond is begun in earnest. These bracelets demonstrate the circle of life, the infinite love and commitment each of you holds for the other, the physical as well as the spiritual blending of two souls into a joined presence, together for eternity.”

Her biotics faded and she released her hold, withdrawing her hands. “Your bracelets, like your souls, will remain forever linked … and physically connected until your bonding meld is complete. Their separation will indicate when the full blessings of Athame have been bestowed upon your union.”

Liara and Rachael—carefully moving their arms within the linked bracelets so they could clasp hands—turned toward each other with their faces just a few centimeters apart and knelt before the Priestess, who laid her hands gently upon their heads, encouraging them to lean into one another and begin their bonding meld.

Shepard gently touched her forehead to Liara’s and calmed her thoughts; after a moment, she felt the gentle, welcome presence at the back of her mind and opened herself fully to her Ionúin Álainn. {Liara. You are fully aware of the depth of my love for you. You are the star of each night and the brightness of every morning. I will lay down my own life for you should such become necessary. There shall never be another in this existence that is more important to me than you.} Rachael could ‘see’ the happy smile of her Ionúin Álainn in her mind as she finished; the happiness she felt brought tears to her eyes as she waited for Liara’s answering pledge of love.

{Rachaél. I believe our meeting on Therum was a gift from the Goddess. It was shortly after you rescued me from the trap in the Prothean ruins that I first touched your mind … where the seeds of my love for you took root and began to grow. I pledge to you that yours will be the name I cry aloud in the night and the eyes into which I smile in the morning. I shall always be a shield for your back, just as you have been and continue to be for mine. I will honor your culture as we join customs to form a trusting relationship, anchored in mutual respect and loving adoration. I am yours, Siame, until the final turning of the tides delivers all of us to the far away shores of Athame’s celestial realm.}

Shepard felt the slowly diminishing presence that was Liara as the asari lovingly withdrew from her mind; opening her eyes to the physical world, Rachael gazed into an adoring pair of eyes the color of azurite and smiled. She was only dimly aware of the priestess offering the final blessing of their union; upon uttering the final word, the bond holding their bracelets together dissolved, freeing their wrists. The Spectre instantly used her newly freed arm to reach around Liara’s side; placing the palm of her hand against the sensitive folds of her lower back, she spread her fingers wide as she hugged the asari tightly to her body and pressed their lips together. “I never allowed myself to believe we could achieve this amount of happiness, my Ionúin Álainn.” Rachael’s words were not spoken or whispered so much as breathed as their lips parted. “That we stand here together, our union blessed by the Goddess, is no less than a minor miracle.”

They turned their heads in unison to look at the priestess, who bade them stand and face the
assembled guests; saying, “In the eyes of Athame these humble people, a human and an asari, are forever joined by a bond as unbreakable as their bracelets. May their union be forever blessed by the Goddess.”

A/N: And so we have reached the end of this portion of Rachaél Shepard’s odyssey, begun so many months before with her choice of synthesis for organic and machine life. Thanks to my Beta reader and (more importantly) my co-author, Desert Sunrise, Rachaél and Liara are officially bondmates. Liara has left her inherited job as the Shadow Broker; Rachaél, though still a Spectre, will resign from the Systems Alliance in an attempt to enjoy her ‘happy ever after’ with the love of her life. Thanks to everyone for following this story.

Unfortunately, the galaxy continues to harbor those whose livelihood depends upon preying on innocents, whether by piracy, extortion or trading in slaves. Samantha Traynor and Griffen Buchanan, using the specialized equipment installed inside Iringù-Eßizkur, will be rebuilding the Shadow Broker network in the belief that information is still the most powerful force in the galaxy; with their help, Captains Bill Cody and Yuán Xiùlán will be out to stop the gangs, beginning with the Blue Suns.

Thanks to everyone following this story; it continues on in *Resurrection of the Shadow Broker.*

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