TRANSFORMATION, PART IV: Resurrection of the Shadow Broker

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Summary

The Shadow Broker: An entity that has seemingly lived forever, indomitable and insatiable in its thirst for information, instilling hope and fear into its patron’s lives … and haunting those who pray their secrets are never found. The institution was nearly destroyed by the Reaper War—many thought it was. This is the story of its rebirth … of the Resurrection of the Shadow Broker. Note: Bioware owns all, except the OC’s, which are imagined by myself, along with a number of asari OC’s ‘borrowed’ from Desert Sunrise.

Notes

With the exception of the OCs and extended timeline created by my co-writer and myself, EA/Bioware owns everything about the Mass Effect universe.
– chapters are generally uploaded on the last day of each month –
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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*True power lies not in the spotlight, but in the influential shadows.* — J. Adam Snyder

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**CE** – Common Era … the beginning of Galactic Standard Time (**GST**)  
**Epiphany** - an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure

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Data. Facts and figures. Intelligence. Statistics. Whatever term is used to describe it, the gathering, organization and dissemination of information has seemingly been a requirement since the rise of civilized beings, whether asari, batarian, human, salarian, or turian, just to name the galaxy’s five dominant, spaceflight capable races.

Of these, the asari and salarians, followed by the turians, discovered and settled the enormous space station that came to be known as the Citadel, the only other artificial construct in an otherwise empty system; it shares the system with a mass relay, one of a network of similarly ancient devices found to be scattered throughout the galaxy.

Since the earliest days of their combined, recorded history, all the races gathered and traded, then bought and sold information. The development of automated data recovery systems rapidly became increasingly more sophisticated, gaining in ability … and capacity. Over time, this gave rise to people of various races becoming information brokers, first trading, then buying information for the lowest acceptable price and selling it for as much as the buyer was willing to pay.

Of these, one broker came to dominate the trade, with a veritable army of gatherers—those that obtained information about anything and everything for their employer—and an army of enforcers, charged with preventing anyone from stealing data from the broker. This broker was never seen, preferring to work clandestinely, behind the scenes … *in the shadows*. This trader, seeming to have been in business in perpetuity, came to be known as the **Shadow Broker**.

As the undisputed ruler of a vast information trading organization, the Broker *always* sells to the highest bidder; the buying and selling of every secret is done in such a way as to prevent any one customer from being allowed to gain a significant advantage. This strategy forces all of the Broker’s customers to continue trading with the Broker in order to avoid becoming disadvantaged, thus ensuring the Broker’s continued dominance of the business.

Prior to 2185-CE, the identity … even the race of the Shadow Broker was a mystery. This changed dramatically when an asari, Dr Liara T’Soni—accompanied by Commander Rachael Shepard and a squad from the Cerberus-owned frigate **Normandy SR-2**—boarded the Broker’s unnamed ship in geosynchronous orbit above the planet Hagalaz, in order to free Feron, a drell information trafficker captured and imprisoned by soldiers employed by the Broker.

Since the ship had been constructed and placed in orbit prior to the discovery of the yahg race in 2125-CE, Liara theorized that this Broker, at some point after having been smuggled from his home world of Parnack, assumed the position and title after murdering the previous Shadow Broker. As smart as he was ruthless, the yahg had been running the organization for at least six decades. It was during their final, desperate battle aboard the Broker’s Ship that Shepard managed
to distract the beast just long enough for Liara to kill him.

As they had already eliminated all the operatives aware of the Broker’s true identity, Liara chose to continue in her role as an information broker by taking over the ship and running the organization, leaving no one the wiser that a transition had taken place. As the new Shadow Broker, Liara vowed to help Shepard discover a strategy to combat and defeat the Reapers.

Shortly after Commander Shepard was incarcerated at an Alliance facility in Vancouver, the Illusive Man ordered several of his cruisers to attack and destroy the Shadow Broker’s ship. Upon learning of this, Liara and Feron loaded as much of her vital equipment as possible into a shuttle and escaped before the Cerberus fleet’s arrival. With the shuttle far enough away to remain undetected by Cerberus, Liara remotely piloted the Broker’s massive ship on a collision course with one of the Cerberus cruisers; they watched in grim satisfaction as the mangled remains of both vessels careened into the destructive atmosphere of Hagalaz.

Thanks to Shepard’s destruction of the Bahak relay, Liara knew the Reapers arrival in the galaxy had been postponed, if only for a limited amount of time. Upon reaching the Citadel after a two-relay jump from the Hourglass Nebula, Liara purchased a previously owned, asari-manufactured light corvette, into which she and Feron installed all the special equipment they had salvaged from the Broker’s ship. With her renewed ability to clandestinely look for information, she contacted Admiral Hackett of the System’s Alliance Navy and voiced her concerns about the Reapers; he agreed with her and enlisted her aid in discovering a way to stop them. Once again, she began regularly coming into conflict with the Illusive Man and Cerberus, as her own agents started crossing paths with his.

When a number of her leads pointed to plans for a device in the Prothean archives on Mars, Hackett sent her there to retrieve them. Upon learning of this, the Illusive Man sent troops there to intercept T’Soni, retrieve whatever she had discovered, then kill her. It was during this time the Reapers, having arrived in the Kite’s Nest en masse—as well as having arrived in other clusters along the galaxy’s outer rim—utilized the relay in the Harsa System to plow through the Exodus Cluster on their way to an all-out assault of Earth.

Rather than risk taking her equipment-laden corvette to Mars, Dr T’Soni had left it in the hands of Feron, the drell she had rescued from the clutches of the previous Broker. As Feron labored unaided to perform the Broker’s standard daily operations without interruption, Liara had flown to Mars in an Alliance shuttlecraft to continue her research. After being rescued from Cerberus troops by Commander Shepard, Major Kaidan Alenko and Lieutenant James Vega, she traveled to the Citadel on board the Normandy, only to endure a truly disappointing meeting with the Council. Liara decided to have Feron rendezvous with the stealth frigate in order to transfer and install a significant portion of her specialized equipment into Miranda Lawson’s former quarters on the ship.

In her desperate need for crewmen she could trust, Shepard used her status as a Council Spectre to intercede on behalf of Ken Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels. The engineers—having left the Systems Alliance to work on the Normandy SR-2 under Commander Shepard—had been arrested and detained as Cerberus collaborators; granting them amnesty so they were free to rejoin the ship on which they’d been assigned since its maiden flight had an additional benefit—the pair were able to assist the Broker in connecting and testing the equipment as they relocated it from the corvette, which Liara then gave to Feron, just before sending him forward as a trusted special agent of the Broker.

With Liara firmly embedded in her new quarters on the port side of Deck Three, she continued her
work as the Shadow Broker while also going planet-side with Shepard on their two-fold mission to rally the rest of the galaxy’s species in the war against the Reapers and to defeat Cerberus and the Illusive Man as he attempted to find a way to control the invaders for his own selfish purposes. At the conclusion of the war, the Normandy, having failed to reach the Charon relay before becoming engulfed in the green energy wave from the Crucible, was cast to the far reaches of the galaxy.

My full name is Samantha Daunton Traynor, but only my mother ever called me by all three … usually when I was in some kind of major trouble. My friends call me Sammy, or just Sam. Professionally, it’s generally just Traynor. With everything that has been going on in my life of late, I thought it might be useful to write a bit about what led up to me assuming the role of the most powerful information broker in the galaxy … not that this will ever see the light of day.

I spent just over a decade in the Systems Alliance Military, the details of which I will not go into here; suffice it to say that the longer I stayed, the more I became convinced the Alliance is nothing more than a giant grinder designed to use, then crush the people that work for them, until there is nothing left but an empty husk, similar to what the Reapers created when they invaded the galaxy.

Rather than continue to suffer their utter disregard for my many achievements, including graduating from a black ops training program at the top of my class, I resigned. Neither my captain nor the Fleet Admiral would clear my service record of all the redactions; additionally, they wanted me to volunteer to live inside the Reaper/Repository Iringù-Eßizkur and use the specialized equipment—left behind by the previous information broker—for Alliance needs only. Becoming a private citizen was the only way I would use the Broker’s equipment. Any information I retrieved would be sold to the highest bidder, and Admiral Steven Hackett could take the Systems Alliance and fly straight to hell.

With help from a former comrade-in-arms, now a private citizen himself, I began the process of rebuilding the network of gatherers … and enforcers, in every part of the galaxy. It will take some time, but make no mistake! The title Shadow Broker will once again strike fear into the hearts of anyone in the business of hiding secrets.

During the Normandy’s return trip from the edge of the galaxy, docked inside the Nazara-class Reaper Žiuk’Durmah—henceforth referred to as a Repository—I was taking a break on the docking platform outside the ship’s port side airlock. While idly studying Iringù-Eßizkur, the Destroyer-class Repository docked ahead of the frigate while the food and fuel supplies it had brought were being transferred to the Normandy’s hanger bay, I experienced what I could only describe as an epiphany.

Convinced the Alliance would want to remove Liara and all her equipment from the frigate as soon as we returned to the Citadel, I had been attempting to think of a way for the Shadow Broker to retain her independence from oversight … by any government or race. To that end, Liara required her own ship; upon closer inspection, I believed I had found exactly what was needed—a vessel similar in size to the Normandy. It was small enough to be difficult to see or find, able to safely touch down on most Earth-like planets and then leave under its own power, and incredibly fast and exceedingly well-armed for its size. Possessing a communications ability second-to-none, it also did not require a potentially corruptible … and expensive … crew to fly or maintain her.

Once I convinced Liara to transfer to Iringù-Eßizkur, it was only a matter of disconnecting all the specialized equipment from her quarters on the Normandy, moving it in an orderly fashion to Iringù-Eßizkur’s interior and—along with the assistance of Tali’Zorah, Bethany Westmoreland and Sarah Campbell—hooking it all into the Repository’s power and communications grid.
Liara, while expressing some trepidation at the idea of traveling by herself inside a living machine, had not requested that anyone from the Normandy accompany her.

At a meeting in the ship’s conference room, it was decided that she would definitely need a companion … someone capable of performing some of the ‘heavy lifting’ that might become necessary should she succeed in finding and boarding any of the facilities abandoned by Cerberus during the Reaper War.

Major Alenko expressed doubt that organic survivors would be found at any of the stations Liara might reach, but didn’t wish for her to have to enter any of them alone, observing it wouldn’t be the same as an archeological expedition.

Of the several candidates aboard the Normandy, the most logical choices were the non-Alliance personnel aboard. Turian general Garrus Vakarian and quarian engineer Tali’Zorah vas Normandy had each fought alongside T’Soni on many of Shepard’s ground missions during the war, mainly against Cerberus troops attempting to thwart the commander’s efforts to bring the different races together against the common threat to galactic civilization.

Tali would have joined Liara with no hesitation, if she had been going to travel in a conventional space-faring vessel; as she would be venturing forth inside a Reaper—a living machine—the quarian told of being sick to her stomach each evening after spending a day inside Iringù-Ebizzur running cables and connecting equipment to the power and comms grid inside the construct. Expressing her regrets, she told Garrus she would hug and kiss him when he left but could not bring herself to join him.

And so it was that Liara T’Soni, accompanied by the turian general Garrus Vakarian, placed her trust in a living machine—a heavy Destroyer-class Reaper turned Repository by Shepard’s choice on the Crucible—as they departed from the Sol System bound for Arcturus. From there, Iringù-Ebizzur set her course for the Horse Head Nebula, utilizing her own impressive FTL capability to travel through dark space between systems without the benefit of the still disabled Mass Relays. The trip across interstellar space would take four-to-five weeks to complete, giving Liara plenty of time to monitor her data feeds and compile information while listening to Rachael’s extensive collection of classical music from Earth’s mid-seventeenth to late-nineteenth centuries.

◊ FROM THE PERSONAL LOGS of the SHADOW BROKER ◊

Liara’s heart was in her throat as she activated the inner airlock hatch to gain access to Cronos Station. She cautiously following Garrus into the first chamber inside the airlock; a compartment for repair crews to suit up for work outside the station. Even while the memories dredged up by the big turian’s mention of the previous broker’s ship over Hagalaz had her mentally shuddering, she followed him deeper into the station.

Of great interest to the asari was the number and variety of Cerberus troops, long since dead where they fell. The walls and interior furnishings all bore silent witness to the ferocity of the battle waged against them by Shepard, EDI and Vega – additionally, there were shards and pieces from shattered shield generators and destroyed gun turrets scattered across the decking.

With guidance from Iringù-Ebizzur, Liara found the entrance to the Illusive Man’s private sanctuary; there she discovered a treasure-trove of terminals connected to the station’s servers. Rather than attempt to look at the multitude of files available to her, she directed Iringù-Ebizzur to download copies of all the files so she could study them at her leisure while her Guardian-Repository traveled to her next destination, Lazarus Station.
Upon boarding and exploring Lazarus Station, Liara was horrified to discover an enormous number of inactive mechs, still in their shipping crates; unfortunately, the storage area was patrolled by a number of active LOKI Mechs, along with several YMIR Heavies.

She and Garrus had ultimately retreated back to the station’s hanger deck in order to up-armor and equip themselves with heavier weapons. After returning to the storage area and dealing with all the active mechanical threats to their safety, the pair were able to access the cold-storage areas at the far side of the vast warehouse.

Discovering the contents of the stasis pods inside one of several cold-storage compartments had Liara believing she had seen ghosts; each pod contained a living clone of Rachaél Shepard, eyes closed and face relaxed as if asleep. After catching her breath and being assured by Garrus that she was not imagining things, the pair once again returned to Iriqù-Ebizkù. She had the Repository send a message to Harbinger, requesting the services of Miranda Lawson.

When the Hong Kong II and Normandy arrived in the system, Liara returned to the Normandy to confer with Rachaél while Garrus and a squad of Marines more thoroughly explored the storage areas; in addition to the three pods already discovered, the existence of an additional four pods was revealed in an adjacent compartment, each containing a living, apparently healthy clone of Commander Rachaél Shepard. All had apparently been grown from Shepard’s DNA samples, stolen sometime prior to her death over Alchera and her two-year long reconstruction on a Cerberus operating table.

Before the procedure was begun to join Shepard’s spirit with a cloned body, Miranda Lawson revealed that the majority of Rachaél’s originally repaired body had also been cloned, due to the catastrophic physical injuries she suffered in her uncontrolled plunge to the surface of Alchera. She surmised that an enormous part of their success in giving her a new life then was attributable to the numerous Reaper-derived implants the Lazarus team had grafted into her body.

After Dr Chakwas and Miranda selected the most viable clone to attempt the procedure, Ken Donnelly and Tali’Zorah rigged several portable power supplies; these were used to keep all of the pods powered during their move from the station to Harbinger’s interior. Once relocated, the pods would be connected to power sources within the ancient machine. The plan—once Shepard’s spiritual essence was joined with the clone chosen by Lawson and Dr Chakwas—was for the seven remaining pods to remain powered by the massive Repository for as long as deemed necessary by Rachaél and Liara.

In order to join Shepard’s spiritual self with the corporeal clone, Harbinger uploaded her from the Normandy’s servers into his own memory banks; he then inserted a copy of Shepard’s spiritual essence into the clone’s brain, transforming an essentially blank mind into a copy of Rachaél Shepard, with all her knowledge, memories and experiences as they existed at the moment of transfer. In theory, she could grow old, reenter Harbinger before death took her physical form and inhabit another clone, thus extending her life past the age when most humans died.

After Liara confirmed to her own satisfaction that the procedure was successful and she could once again hold Rachaél’s physical form in her arms, she finalized plans to leave her post as an information broker and return to Thessia with her human lover, there to formalize her bond with the woman. Liara T’Soni had given up nearly everything twice in order to bring Shepard back to life. Upon their return to the Widow System, Admiral Hackett granted the commander sixty days leave from the Alliance so she could travel to Thessia with Liara.

Meanwhile, with the Normandy and Hong Kong II once again docked at the Citadel, I had been tasked with an unofficial assignment ashore; working in support of Zaeed Massani’s hunt for Blue
Suns second-in-command Solem Dal’Serah, I found myself once again entering Iringû-Eßizkur, there to employ the equipment left behind by Liara T’Soni, in order to find a way inside the Blue Suns headquarters building in Delta Ward.

I was accompanied by the Normandy’s new Weapons Systems Division Chief, Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton; after hacking my way into the fortified building, Sandee and I decimated all the batarian soldiers opposing us. Unfortunately, I had not expected Dal’Serah to have a bomb in his desk; we both nearly lost our lives from the explosion in that massive piece of furniture.

Fortunately, I had previously discovered Dal’Serah’s emergency ‘bolt-hole’ and mapped it for Massani; unknown to the cowardly batarian, Zaeed was waiting near the tunnel’s exit while Patton and I kicked in the front door. After sending a message to the Normandy, the wily old merc, with the assistance of Iringû-Eßizkur, followed Dal’Serah to Omega Station; from there, they tracked the batarian to Susskind Station in the Raheel-Leyya System. Once on the station, it was only a few days’ work for Massani to capture and imprison Solem Dal’Serah and Vido Santiago.

Instructing Iringû-Eßizkur to send a request to Harbinger for backup by the Normandy, Massani’s wait for the ship’s arrival was brief; once the frigate was in the system, the two criminals were moved – notwithstanding interference on the docks by several Blue Suns soldiers – to the ship’s brig for their flight back to Alliance custody on the Citadel. Of great surprise to Captain Bill Cody, Massani had not carried out his promise to beat either Santiago or Dal’Serah to death with his fists.

Nearly healed from my numerous injuries, I had been released to light duty and discharged from Huerta Memorial Hospital. I initiated a comms-call to Liara T’Soni on Thessia; after explaining the reasons for my intention to resign from the Alliance Navy, she advanced me a modest sum of credits to get started and gave me the use of a non-descript apartment in the Citadel’s Bravo Ward.

Having secured financial backing from Dr T’Soni, my next meeting was with my captain on board the Normandy so he could brief me on the Alliance’s need for someone – preferably myself – to be assigned to inhabit Iringû-Eßizkur as an info broker for the Alliance – a new Shadow Broker. When Cody explained that neither he nor Admiral Hackett would be able—or willing—to correct the redactions and omissions in my permanent service record, I handed him my dog tags along with my resignation from the Systems Alliance Navy.

Resignation accepted, I was a private citizen again—for the first time since age 19—and free of any restrictions imposed by the Systems Alliance. I boarded Iringû-Eßizkur with one goal in mind—to become an information broker every bit as powerful, and feared—as the murderous yahg that had previously held the position prior to his elimination by Liara T’Soni and Commander Shepard near the end of their campaign to stop the Collectors.

After initiating a search for Griffen Buchanan’s whereabouts, I went shopping, then joined Xiülán for a quiet dinner and evening together. Upon finding the freighter on which Buchanan was employed, I surprised him at the Alpha Ward docks right before the MSV Celestial Viper began offloading its cargo. Later, after accompanying me to my apartment and seeing the inside of the intelligent machine where he’d be expected to live and work part time, he listened to my offer of making him an equal partner in my new endeavor. With the unexpected loss of his position on the salarian-owned Celestial Viper to a less-expensive salarian replacement forcing his hand, Griff reluctantly agreed to join forces with me and Iringû-Eßizkur.

The Shadow Broker was back in business.
Welcome to the latest story in the ‘Transformation’ series. My intention is to post each new chapter at the end of the month. Comments are always more than welcome! Thanks for taking the time to read this story.
Chapter Summary

This chapter provides some background and recent history on Traynor’s and Yuán’s former partner/squad member, Griffen Buchanan, from just after the end of the Reaper War.

No, this is not the beginning of a new chapter in my life; this is the beginning of a new book! That first book is already closed, ended, and tossed into the seas; this new book is newly opened, has just begun! Look, it is the first page! And it is a beautiful one! — C. JoyBell C.

Kalinan’s Best – A salarian drink brewed with marsh grass, winter salt and barley. (Source: CDN)

♦ ROYAL LONDON HOSPITAL, EARTH · SOL SYSTEM ♦
♦ June 2187 · Two Months Post-War ♦

Master Chief Petty Officer Griffen ‘Griff’ Buchanan was attempting—without much success—to find a comfortable position for his 206 cm, 97 kg frame in a bed that was clearly designed for someone of a much more modest stature. After insuring the head of the bed was lying flat, he carefully rolled up on his left side—taking care to ensure all the tubes and wires plugged into his body were free and clear—and slowly drew his legs up with knees bent, until his feet were no longer hanging over the edge of the mattress.

Finally able to relax just a bit, he closed his eyes while attempting to ignore the constant aching of his right shoulder, side, lower back and hip. Despite receiving the best of care by the doctors here, Griff’s injuries had not responded well to treatment; he had been in this facility since being retrieved from the area where the energy beam from the Citadel had been used to abduct people for conversion. That he had not died was considered to be a minor miracle by most of the people hearing his story; Buchanan just considered himself fortunate to be alive. His entire unit, 96 soldiers strong, had been annihilated by overwhelming numbers of Reaper creatures, mostly Husks and Cannibals, with numerous Marauders in the mix.

He didn’t remember, but had been told of being thrown 15 to 20 meters through the air by a passing Mako as it violently exploded upon encountering one of the multitude of red energy beams with which the Reapers were sweeping the area. He had landed like a discarded child’s toy, coming to rest nearly as destroyed as the pile of broken concrete and shattered steel on which he landed; this hard landing was responsible for his concussion, along with his dislocated right shoulder, five fractured ribs—one of which punctured his lung—bruised liver, three fractured vertebrae and the broken right side of his pelvis. After undergoing a number of surgeries and spending a full month with his right leg in a traction splint, he was slowly recovering.

Buchanan’s only family had been in San Francisco at the beginning of the war; he had made several attempts to contact them or discover their whereabouts, all without success; as the megalopolis had been virtually leveled in the first wave of Reaper attacks in 2186, it seemed increasingly unlikely that any of his relatives had survived the invasion.
Thinking of family led him to think of his comrades in the military; he wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to Samantha Traynor after she been transferred off of Arcturus Station. Last news he had of her, she’d been reassigned to the Alliance R&D facility north of London, a number of months prior to the invasion.

His expression clouded at the thought of Sammy fighting against an overwhelming hoard of Reaper creatures; as good as she was—and he had witnessed just how terrifyingly efficient she could be in close-quarters fighting—he felt she would have been overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers, particularly since the creatures seemed completely immune to fear … or pain.

*Best not to think about that!* he thought. *Think about something positive, like walking out of this place without crutches.* Clearing his mind of thoughts about the recent past, particularly of the terrifying final battles, he finally managed to drift off to a dreamless sleep.

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**ALLIANCE BASE, LONDON · EARTH · SOL SYSTEM**

* August 2187 · Four Months Post-War *

Navy Lieutenant Commander Allison McIntyre looked up from the datapad she was inspecting as the door to her office slid open. Her aide, standing in the doorway, stated in a moderately loud voice, “Master Chief Buchanan is here for his appointment, Ma’am.”

“Please send him in, Corporal… thank you.” Rising from her chair, she schooled her expression of surprise at seeing the size of the man that literally filled her doorway as he entered her office.

Bearing only the slightest trace of a limp that seemed to favor his right leg, Griff walked up to her desk, came to attention and said, “Master Chief Buchanan reporting as ordered, Ma’am.”

McIntyre smiled as she responded, “Nice to meet you, Master Chief.” Indicating the chair beside her desk, she added, “Please, have a seat.” Retaking her own chair as he moved and sat down, she continued, “I was just looking at your service record, Mr Buchanan. Seems you’re fortunate to have survived the war.”

With a self-deprecating grin, he nodded his head once as he replied, “So I have been told … by everyone that has heard about how I was injured, Ma’am.” After a brief pause, he added, “And now, thanks to the actions of Commander Shepard on the Crucible, the soulless constructs are helping to repair and rebuild all they destroyed.” Shaking his head in seeming disbelief, he sighed.

“Sounds as if you’re not completely happy with how the war concluded, Master Chief.” She studied the solemn face of the man as he looked down at his hands, fingers spread atop his thighs.

“Sounds as if you’re not completely happy with how the war concluded, Master Chief.” She studied the solemn face of the man as he looked down at his hands, fingers spread atop his thighs.

Bringing his head up to return her gaze, he explained, “They were winning, Ma’am … no way in hell we could have prevailed against them. So, I am happy that Shepard and the crew of the *Normandy* found a way to stop permanently them … but my feeling is that after all the destruction and loss of life galaxy-wide, it seems just a bit strange to be trusting them to help us.” Griff slowly shook his head as he concluded, “It just feels like we may be unknowingly asking for trouble in the long run.”

McIntyre leaned back slightly as she spun her chair in order to look out the window beside her desk. “You make a valid point, but we really have no other options; the machines are in the galaxy to stay … at least for the foreseeable future. We need their help to rebuild, so we accept them and move on with our lives, best we’re able.” After a few moments, she turned back towards Griff and said, “Speaking of which, I need to see about your future with the Alliance, Master Chief.”
Retrieving the datapad she’d been reviewing before he had entered her office, she studied it for several seconds before saying, “You’ve been released for light duty, Master Chief, which means you’ll be stationed here on Earth… probably for the next six to eight months … maybe up to a year.” She made several entries on the datapad before looking up at the calm, greenish-gray eyes regarding her. “You’ll be coordinating the receipt and delivery of relief supplies at the nearby freighter docks. I know it’s not exactly what you’re used to doing, but there’s a real shortage of people with your organizational skills, Master Chief. You can make a real difference there while you continue to recover from your injuries.”

The Lieutenant Commander touched the surface of her datapad, prompting Griff’s omnitool to light up in response as it downloaded all the pertinent information from the device. “Everything you need is on your omnitool, Master Chief … where you’ll be working, who you’ll report to and where you’ll be staying. Your new CO should be able to assist you with anything else you need.”

McIntyre stood from her chair, prompting Griff to follow suite; she stuck out her hand as she faced him and said, “It was nice to meet you, Mr Buchanan. And, thank you.”

Griff clasped her hand and pumped it twice as he asked, “For? …”

The woman grinned at him as she explained, “For your service during the war. Many of our people … too damned many, in my view, gave their last full measure. I intend to thank all of those still alive as I meet them.” Releasing his hand, she added, “Good luck to you, Master Chief.”

♦ October 2187 · Six Months Post-War ♦

It had only taken Griffen Buchanan nearly eight weeks to come to a decision regarding his continued service in the Systems Alliance Navy. As he packed his bags for his move out of base housing, he thought about everything that had taken place since he'd been discharged from the hospital. His stint as a freight coordinator had been … merely okay. It was a job he was more than capable of doing; after only four weeks without any real challenge, he was bored nearly out of his mind.

Griff didn’t know where he was going or what he was going to do next. His physical recovery from his many injuries had progressed to the point where he was no longer in constant pain, but he had accepted the reality that he would never again be able to jump into trouble without thinking of the consequences. His numerous surgeries had mended his bones as well as could be expected; thinking of how Yuán Xiùlán’s injured thigh had been repaired after their mission to Cartagena Station made him truly wish he’d been on Thessia for his own bone surgeries.

Choosing to request a medical separation from the Alliance hadn’t been an easy decision; like many of his friends, he had joined right after celebrating his eighteenth birthday. During the ensuing thirty years, he had participated in numerous police actions on a variety of human colonies and gone on several clandestine missions with a pair of women he had not seen or heard from since right before the start of the War.

Thinking of Yuán and Traynor brought a grim smile to his face. He had only just learned of Yuán’s transfer from the Tokyo to the Hong Kong II in the spring of 2186; on the other hand, Traynor’s current whereabouts was a mystery. He had totally lost contact with her after she’d been transferred from Arcturus Station to an R&D facility on Earth … he could only hope she had not still been on the planet when the Reapers appeared.

He had fought and destroyed Reaper spawn in a number of cities in North America, but the final battles in London were among the ugliest, most expensive—in terms of human lives lost—actions
he’d ever been involved in. His injuries had been acquired before the fleets arrived with the Crucible; he had a dim, hard to recall memory of the green wave that washed over everything when Shepard activated it, losing her own life in the process.

Standing in the middle of his sitting room, he placed his hands on his hips and slowly turned, visually inspecting his surroundings while mentally calculating what had been here prior to his move-in the beginning of September. *Hardly been in here long enough for the dust to settle*, he thought. Seeing nothing that belonged to him remaining in the room, he sighed as he picked up his travel packs, turned and left the apartment.

He had been granted sixty days of terminal leave before his resignation became final, enough time to get established as a civilian. He had decided to leave London … the best place to find the sort of job that suited him was in Council controlled space. The Citadel—relocated from Earth orbit to the Widow System, and still being repaired by Reapers and the onboard population of Keepers—was the hub for a large number of commercial freight haulers, and he wanted to land a job on one as either a cargo master or cargo handler, a line of work with which he was familiar.

Shortly after arriving on the vast space station, he took a short-term lease on a tiny apartment in Alpha Ward; he needed to be within walking distance of the many freight docks on the station. Additionally, there were a number of small bars and cafés near these docks, though the smaller ships in which Griff was interested were not as well-served by such places.

Buchanan knew the larger ships were all owned by syndicates or corporations, so wasn’t interested in working on any of them; on the other hand, small-to-medium capacity freighters were generally operations consisting of less than five vessels owned by just one or two people.

As their owners normally filled the role of captain for their own vessels and they generally paid their crews by the trip, these vessels had a lot of employee turnover; with razor-thin profit margins, every credit saved by paying crew members miserly wages meant some extra rations or fuel could be bought for the next trip. Transporting cargo paid best when a large amount could be moved all at once by just one vessel. Split among several ships, the same amount of freight had to buy more fuel and pay more people to transport it. It went without saying that owners of smaller ships had to walk a fine line on wage parity in order to retain skilled laborers.

Once Buchanan discovered a small café close to the docks and his apartment, he began frequenting the place. Sitting at a table with a good view of the docks, he used a datapad to run a comparison program on the various ships that regularly docked to discharge cargo, then load up for delivery elsewhere. In only a matter of days he had narrowed the choices down to three vessels, all salarian-owned. Upon completing a bit more research, he approached Valon Hurix, the owner and captain of the *MSV Seeker’s Sunrise*, immediately after it made port during the last week of October 2187.

Griff was in luck … after checking his background to confirm he was former Alliance, Hurix hired him on the spot to assist the other human on board; Griff would be working in the refrigerated section of the cargo hold, monitoring and adjusting temperatures in the several areas set aside for either frozen foodstuffs or shipments that simply needed to be kept at a consistently cold temperature.

The other cargo-master, also former Alliance, was Curtis Mellor, a quiet man in his early seventies; as the two men were assigned alternating work-shifts, Buchanan only saw Mellor during shift-change, when they would get together to go over their daily reports and equipment cry-lists. The work itself wasn’t difficult, but it did require skill at organizing the loads, since each load was generally destined for several recipients. All things considered, Griff felt that leaving the Alliance for work in the private sector was going to be a positive experience.
In just six short weeks, Buchanan had settled into a comfortable routine aboard the salarian-owned freighter *MSV Seeker’s Sunrise*; Captain – and ship’s owner – Valon Hurix had an easy, dedicated week-long run from the Citadel to Annos Basin; from there, the ship next entered the Exodus Cluster, then returned to the Citadel.

Because the weekly round-trip was so repetitive, Griff had developed an increasingly uneasy feeling that the predictability of the *Seeker’s Sunrise’s* trips out and back had made the ship an attractive target for mercenaries.

The only person questioning Griff’s motives for having all his gear safely stowed in his heavy travel bags, rather than in the lockers and bunk-side cabinets provided for his use, was cargo-master Curtis Mellor, who soon decided that emulating Buchanan’s precautions and enduring a small amount of daily inconvenience was preferable to losing his pitiful few possessions in the unlikely event of being forced to evacuate the ship with little to no warning.

Griff’s sense of uneasiness concerning a merc attack turned out to be erroneous, but his gut feeling that *something* was going to happen actually proved to be accurate during his shift the evening of the 20th, just prior to their return trip to the Citadel from the Exodus Cluster. As they were approaching the Utopia relay, the pilot activated the ship’s PA to report a delay, saying the relay was aligned to receive traffic from another system. Acting totally on instinct, Buchanan ran to his quarters, woke Mellor, grabbed his travel bags and trotted to the closest escape pod, there to wait beside its open entrance hatch.

Curtis, grumpy at being dragged from his rack for no apparent reason, walked up to Griff and plopped his bags down on the deck. Using his own nickname for Griff, he asked, “What the hell are ya doing, Buck? Is this some kind of sick joke?”

Buchanan frowned at the man, replying, “No joke, Curt. Something bad is about to happen.” His gaze steady, he continued, “If I am wrong … if I interrupted your sleep for no good reason … I will stand the first half of your next shift.”

Curtis only had time to nod in acceptance of Griff’s offer when they were both jolted by a violent shudder through the deck, coinciding with a low-pitched rumble from the stern; this was immediately followed by the trilling sound of the collision alarm accompanied by the slamming of every internal hatch in the habitat area of the ship. The alarm was silenced long enough for Captain Hurix to make an announcement. “Catastrophic core breach in engineering … drive core failure eminent. All personnel, abandon ship! Get to the escape pods! Abandon ship!”

“He does not need to tell me twice! Come on … we need to get clear!” Griff grabbed his bags and pushed them and his bulky frame into the escape pod, followed by Mellor. Closing the hatch from inside the pod initiated a fifteen-second countdown, enabling the two men to stow their gear, get seated and pull the restraint bars down; as the bars latched, the pod was ejected from the ship.

The onboard computer rotated the pod on its axis and fired the maneuvering thrusters to slow their flight away from the ship. Buchanan was able to catch a glimpse of the stricken freighter through the viewports as the pod rotated around; from this vantage point, the thruster packs on the freighter appeared undamaged.

There were several escape pods in their immediate vicinity; the computer in each pod caused all of them to maneuver towards each other. Auto-survival protocols in the programming would bring all the pods within a few meters of each other, creating a larger target for a rescue ship’s detection equipment.
Buchanan had started to doubt himself and the ship’s captain when the *Seeker’s Sunrise* unexpectedly exploded, the fireball erupting from the drive section as the suddenly liberated, white-hot core of eezo mixed with the rapidly expanding helium-3 from the ruptured tanks. The shockwave jostled the escape pods, but all were far enough from the detonation to avoid damage. Curtis inspected the auto-distress transmitter to confirm it was working; in theory, each of the seven escape pods should be transmitting a homing signal. With any luck, all would be retrieved and their passengers rescued, most likely by an Alliance team dispatched from Eden Prime, within the next twenty to thirty hours. Upon contacting the people in the other pods, Buchanan was happy to learn the entire crew had managed to escape the *Seeker’s Sunrise*. As there was nothing more to be done, Griff and Curtis each sat back to relax and wait to be rescued.

Rather than having to wait for twenty … or even thirty hours, the escape pods from the *MSVSeeker’s Sunrise* were not retrieved until nearly forty hours had passed. By this time, the pod in which Griff and Curtis had survived the freighter’s destruction was on reserve power; Griff had reduced the lighting and heat levels to their minimum settings, preferring to keep the atmosphere scrubbers adequately powered. They had resorted to rationing their drinking water when it became apparent their recovery would not be as immediate as they had believed.

When their pod was finally retrieved—along with the others—Griffen had mixed emotions. While glad to be out of the escape pod, he was more than a little troubled to find himself on a Blue Suns corvette—the *Golden Nova*—the captain was a turian, with the crew a mix of batarians and humans, none of whom appeared to be overly friendly. As for Griff, he and Curtis were happy they’d taken their travel bags with them, until Captain Hurix questioned why they were the only two members of the crew to have been so well prepared for a catastrophe.

Hurix was fortunate to have made his veiled accusations in the corvette’s small mess hall; there were nearly a dozen other people nearby—rescued and rescuers alike—close enough to save the salarian from having his neck broken if Griff had chosen to reach out and grab him. As that thought crossed his mind, his thoughts tumbled back to Specialist Samantha Traynor. *She would have killed him where he stood and taken on the rest of the bastards in this compartment without a second thought. Wish she was with us right now.* As all the salarian had was an unfounded suspicion, there was nothing more he could say or do without incurring a libel accusation from the two humans; he couldn’t even refuse to pay them the salaries they were owed.

With the *Seeker’s Sunrise* completely destroyed by the core breach and her jettisoned cargo pods salvaged by the Blue Suns, Hurix had no way to prove the explosion was anything more than an unfortunate accident. The salarian prevailed on the *Golden Nova’s* captain to transport them to the Citadel, promising a payment – less the salvage value of the escape pods and cargo the Blue Suns had retrieved – once he received a settlement from insurance. The turian acquiesced, as rescue and salvage laws in space had to be obeyed – it wouldn’t be wise for anyone, even the Blue Suns, to run afoul of accepted standards of conduct in space, lest they find themselves in a similar situation at some point in the future.

Griffen Buchanan’s terminal leave from the Alliance had ended in December; as the explosion that destroyed *Seeker’s Sunrise* had also taken his livelihood, he was forced to return to the tiny apartment near the freight docks. Buchanan still had a modest savings account, which he had managed to maintain since his departure from the Alliance, but he was now back to square one, in that he once again found himself looking for employment as a freight handler or cargo master. He had purposely not asked for a recommendation from his former captain, as the salarian harbored a
completely unfounded suspicion that either he or Curtis Mellor, the other cargo master on board and also a human, had somehow engineered the ship’s destruction.

Fortunately, Griff was able to find a berth on the third ship he contacted; the MSV Celestial Viper was in need of an experienced assistant cargo master to work with Surnal Gaemnor, the salarian cargo master in charge. Griff wasn’t a xenophobe by any stretch of the imagination—he’d even worked with batarians on occasion—but he wasn’t really thrilled to be working on another salarian-owned and captained freight hauler; worse, it seemed the universe was punishing him by forcing him to answer to the human-hating salarian in charge of the ship’s cargo hold. He could have refused the job offer, but the pay was fair and the Celestial Viper had an exemplary safety record. Griff felt he could endure working on the ship long enough to increase his savings back to a comfortable level, particularly once his medical disability pension from the Alliance kicked in at the end of the month. After a few months, he could leave and find another job, hopefully a more agreeable one, with fewer aliens running the show.

♦ OMEGA STATION · SAHRABARIK SYSTEM, OMEGA NEBULA ♦
♦ April 2188 · One Year Post-War ♦

Buchanan, nursing a large, icy-cold mug of batarian ale, was sitting in a dark, dingy bar located seemingly in the bowels of Omega Station. The turian barmaid had assured the human that the ale was uncut; he had been forced to take her at her word, as the ambient light was so dim he couldn’t accurately discern the liquid’s color. It was rather bitter in taste, but Buchanan didn’t drink often enough to know if what he was tasting was thin or not; he did know the ale had a fair percentage of alcohol, if the immediacy of his headache after downing the first mug was any indication. He had decided to savor this second one; he didn’t wish to discover how poorly a drunken, unconscious human was treated down here.

He was on a one-day layover, as the Celestial Viper was waiting for a freighter to arrive from the Shrike Abyssal. He could have returned to his bunk on the ship, but decided he’d seen more than enough of the damned thing in the seven or so weeks he’d been on board; sitting in the twilight darkness of this bar, sipping from a mug of bitter ale, suited him for the moment.

He had studied the freighter’s scheduled itinerary, noting they would next be calling on the port of Milgrom, the nearly destroyed capitol of the human colony on Bekenstein. Studying the manifest of cargo coming from Bovis Tor revealed the majority of the payload was going to be palladium and iridium, raw materials that would either be refined in orbit or on the surface, then utilized in the manufacture of high-end, finished goods in the rebuilt factories on the planet.

The other palladium-rich planet in the Urla Rast system had the misfortune of attracting a disproportionate amount of attention from the Reapers during the latter stages of their invasion; despite massive reconstruction efforts by the now peaceful machines, the volus population—estimated at 3.8 billion people before the invasion—had yet to recover their former numbers. Their capitol city of Usra Dao had been leveled by orbital bombardment; the ruined city still entombed countless volus. Reconstruction work in the ammonia-rich atmosphere could only be undertaken by the volus; anyone else working on the surface needed to wear a sealed environmental suit, something that made working on the heavy-gravity world extremely tiresome. Even with the capable assistance provided by numerous Reapers, it was a slow process.

The Viper would also be receiving a load of platinum—ten containers of a metric tonne each—from the dwarf planet Rosh. Griff had already cleared one corner of the cargo hold in anticipation of receiving these containers. They would be loaded first in order to provide a bit of protection from casual theft; the containers of palladium and iridium would have to be unloaded before the
more expensive containers of platinum could be reached.

As Buchanan took another swallow from his mug, his thoughts drifted back to his time in the Alliance Special Ops group, especially his time with Samantha Traynor and Yuán Xiùlán. He really missed those women, Sammy in particular—not that their relationship had ever been anything but that of a brother and sister; even without being told, Griff knew that Sammy and Xiùlán were lovers, and respected both of them enough to not question their life choices. Ever since then he had never had dealings with batarians that didn’t bring back intense memories of Traynor and her rather … unique … methods of dealing with the pirates that infested Cartagena Station. Sadly, he didn’t expect he’d see her or Yuán ever again.

Heaving a heavy sigh, he downed the rest of his beer in one go, grimacing at the bitter flavor that had only grown more intense as the liquid gradually warmed during the time he had spent staring into its depths. He got to his feet, wincing at the bit of pain that shot down the back of his left leg. His doctors had repaired his broken vertebra to the best of their abilities, but there was still a bit of damage to the nerves going to his thigh muscles—something he’d have to live with, or so he’d been told.

He left the bar and strolled back to the freight docks, there to reenter the Viper and head for bed. He wasn’t looking forward to the headache he’d no doubt be nursing by the time he woke up.

♦ MSV CELESTIAL VIPER, DOCKED AT OMEGA STATION ♦

Griffen Buchanan awakened rather slowly to the uncomfortably loud—to his ears, anyway—trilling of his omnitool. After sleepily managing to make the noise stop on the third attempt, he discovered it was announcing an urgent message from the ship’s executive officer, U’mal Votol; the salarian needed to see Griff as soon as possible to discuss a rather pressing issue.

As he had mentally predicted to himself the previous evening, he was suffering from an alcohol-induced headache, although it wasn’t as severe as he’d expected—probably because he had purposely limited his drinking. After relieving himself, he winced at the image looking back at him in the bathroom mirror; he splashed warm water in his face and dampened his hair, then scrubbed his face dry with a small towel. The reflection staring out of the mirror looked a bit fresher than before … certainly better than he actually felt. Brushing his teeth and rinsing his mouth helped lessen the taste of stale beer; feeling somewhat better, he donned clothes and left his sleeping compartment to go find the ship’s XO.

“Enter!” The nasally voice of U’mal Votol sounded about as Buchanan expected … impatient. Nothing new concerning salarians, he thought as he swept his hand through the haptic interface to open the hatch. Presenting an appearance of moving swiftly was really no problem for Griff—his long legs rapidly ate up distance, even when he was simply strolling. He was standing in front of Votol’s desk before the salarian could raise his eyes. Waving Griff to a nearby chair, he said, “Please sit, human.”

Votol continued speaking at a rapid-fire pace as Griff took a seat in the chair. “As you are no doubt aware, Surnal Gaemnor is… or rather, was… no fan of humans. I am not blind, nor am I ignorant of what transpires on this ship, Buchanan; I am aware Gaemnor made you perform every miserable, dirty or difficult job he didn’t wish to do himself.” He paused, waiting for a moment to see if Griff would respond; when he remained silent, Votol continued, “Late last night, Gaemnor actually allowed his low opinion of humans to take control of his mouth. This was no doubt a direct result of the amount of Kalinan’s Best he had imbibed, if the unpaid bar tab is any
indication. His unkind words about your kind was repaid by a couple of mercs inside a lower-level nightclub... the Med-techs that attempted to resuscitate him reported he suffered a crushed heart and broken neck. They also said he probably never felt a thing. Um, too bad, that.” The salarian looked down as he shook his head slightly and added mirthlessly, “Needless to say, he will not be returning to his former position on this ship.”

Griff had the good sense to refrain from laughing as he thought, *Who would have thought Votol possessed a sense of humor?* Asking “What does that mean for me, then? Do I still have a job?” He waited to see what this salarian would do after the violent death of another of his kind at the hands of some insulted humans.

The salarian was impossible to read as his eyelids slowly swept up across large, golden-flecked eyes. Looking straight at Griff, he said, “You are now the Chief Cargo Master on this ship, Mister Buchanan. I will be looking to hire an assistant for you, but in the meantime, your monthly compensation will be increased to the amount previously being paid to Surnal Gaemnor.” After a brief pause, he added, “You are no doubt aware a freighter arriving from the Shrike Abyssal will be unloading cargo for us. They are due to dock in just under three hours.”

Sensing a dismissal in Votol’s tone, Griff expressed his thanks, stood from his chair and left. Feeling a bit lighter in spirit at his apparent good fortune, he went down to the small mess hall to have some coffee and breakfast before he needed to oversee the cargo transfer from the volus system. He expected it would be a very long day.

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**MSV CELESTIAL VIPER · FREIGHT DOCKS, MILGROM, BEKENSTEIN**

*August 2188*

Captain Max Silva had nearly changed his plans and docked and unloaded the *Viper* at the orbital ‘goods-in-transit’ facilities near the gigantic freight forwarding structure in a geo-synched orbit above Milgrom. For Silva, emptying the ship’s cargo hold in orbit would have saved fuel for the necessary landing near the import/export warehouses on the outskirts of the city. Over time, two of the port side maneuvering thruster packs on the ship’s bow had become increasingly erratic when activated – their uneven firing had nearly caused a collision on close approach to a much smaller transfer vessel over Eden Prime; Silva was not going to wait for an expensive, possibly fatal accident to get the thrusters repaired, so had decided to have the work done on Bekenstein.

In the end, he had stayed with his original plan of grounding the *Viper* near the warehouses to unload his cargo; after the raw palladium, iridium and platinum was unloaded, extraction and refining of the ore would be completed at one of several nearby facilities. From there, the refined materials would be transferred to a number of nearby manufactories in the city.

As soon as the cargo hold was empty, Silva relocated the vessel to the nearby shipyard for repairs to the bow thrusters. While the ship was being serviced, Buchanan used 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.

After enjoying an early dinner at a nearby café, Griff returned to the shipyard in time to board for the short hop to the import/export docks, where he began his preparations for loading the outbound cargo the *Viper* would be delivering to the Citadel.

This trip would be different for Griff, as the entire job of organizing the freight in the massive hold was his responsibility alone, and he couldn’t simply stuff the containers and crates in the cargo bay.
without some degree of organization. The manifest listed cargo from nearly a dozen manufacturers, each of which had a number of customers on the Citadel. Griff needed to load everything with an eye towards an organized unloading at the other end, so needed to know exactly where every last item was placed in the hold and group each shipping container with others that would be going to the same customer; this would enable the cargo to be unloaded and stacked in an orderly fashion.

Invariably during the process of loading the cargo, another pallet or container would arrive later than promised; this sometimes necessitated the removal and relocation of a few containers already on the ship in order to ensure everything destined for each customer on the Citadel was grouped together. By the time every last container and pallet had come aboard, Buchanan had a graphic representation of the Viper’s cargo on a datapad. He was as ready as he could be for the ship to leave Milgrom in order to travel to their next port of call … the Citadel.

♦ COMMERCIAL FREIGHT DOCKS, ALPHA WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

By the time the Celestial Viper had docked at the Citadel, Buchanan was beyond ready for the trip to be over and done; upon its arrival in the Widow System, the ship—along with a dozen or so other freight haulers—had been directed to park in a holding queue near the relay. What began as a short arrival delay soon morphed into a several-hour-long postponement before the ship was permitted to dock. For a few crew members on board, such as the pilot, navigator and engineers, their work on this trip was complete; for Griff and the rest, the real work was just beginning.

Griff had totally expected the salarian cargo master’s death on Omega to increase his own workload; seeing as he had been doing the majority of the work under the human-hating Gaemnor anyway, he was happy to discover he was able to get all of his own chores—along with the salarian’s—completed with a lot less effort, as he no longer had to redo some of his own jobs just to please Gaemnor.

Walking down the broad ramp deployed from the freighter’s main cargo hold, Buchanan idly gazed around the docks before crouching at the end in order to inspect the heavy cables—two on each side—between the ramp and anchor rings rising from the metal surface of the dock. He had just turned to go back into the cargo hold when I said it; his nickname, whispered in a voice that may have seemed familiar … but was most definitely out of place, here on a bustling cargo platform, as we had not spoken since before the war. “Griff.”

After pausing briefly to turn around and look at the dock once more, he resumed walking up the ramp; if I hadn’t stepped aside, his collision with me might have knocked me down. The expression on his face when he saw me told me all I needed to know; he had thought to never see or hear from me again. “Samantha? Samantha Traynor!”

Wrapping his arms around me, he effortlessly lifted me off my feet, hugging me tightly – a bit too tightly – as he happily gushed, “My God, where did you come from? You haven’t changed a bit!” He kissed me on both cheeks before setting me back down on the metal surface beneath us; obviously thrilled to find me alive and apparently well after so much time, he continued with, “I did not think I would ever see you again, Sammy! What the hell have you been doing since the war ended?” Buchanan’s joy at seeing me—his former sister-in-arms—quickly turned to worried concern as I leaned over, placed my hands on my knees and took a couple of shuddering, deep breaths of air.

He waited as I slowly straightened to stand erect; in a slightly wheezy voice, I exclaimed, “Damn, Griff! Never knew you to try’n crush the life out of a friend … but it’s bloody good to see you as
well!” Buchanan reached a hand out to assist me, which I gratefully grasped with both of mine, even as I painfully gasped, “Not to worry, big guy. Got caught in an explosion in Delta; still recovering from a case of blast lung, among a number of other injuries.”

After taking a couple more deep breaths of air, I peered up at him and added, “Doctors released me to light duty, right before I resigned from the Alliance.” Still holding onto Buchanan’s hand, I finally managed to breathe normally and got to the reason I had come to see him. “Can you leave for a while, have a late lunch … or an early dinner with me?” At his look of hesitation, I released his hand and added, “My treat, Griff. I really need to speak with you.”

Something in the way I phrased the question must have set off mental alarms. Back in the day, he would have willingly died to keep me safe … to enable me to complete a mission. Now, despite loving me more than his own sister, after a galaxy-wide conflagration, his hesitation told me he needed a bit more information before saying yes. Crossing his arms across his massive chest, he replied softly, “Not right away, Sammy … I have to oversee the freight transfer off the Viper … I will have a bit of time afterwards … before we begin loading cargo for the next port.” Fixing me with a steady gaze, he asked, “What is this all about, Sammy? Are you in some sort of trouble?”

“No trouble, Griff. I just need to talk to you … and it has nothing to do with the Alliance military. I’m done with ’em, Griff … for the first time in ten years, I’m a private citizen.”

Buchanan broke into a grin for a moment, only to have the suspicious frown from before return. “Aw hell, Traynor … you finally let General Park get under your skin … got yourself court-martialed and discharged … am I correct?”

I could actually feel my face going dark with irritation, and replied in as snarky a voice as I could manage with my still recovering lungs. “That hurts me, Griff … that really fucking hurts!”

Buchanan’s grin returned slightly as he raised his hands, palms facing me. “Okay, okay … I apologize.” Glancing at some dockworkers approaching the ship, he said, “Now, I really need to get our cargo unloaded. Outbound freight begins loading around 0710 tomorrow, so I will have time to sit and chat with you this evening. Will that be okay?”

“Works for me, big guy.” Activating my omnitool, I forwarded the restaurant’s name and location to his tool. “Meet me here.” I nodded, turned and walked down the ramp; once on the docking area’s paved surface, I turned and set off at a brisk pace for my speeder.

I could literally feel Griff’s eyes on my back—probably watching my ass—as I walked back down the ramp. I knew he would be thinking about what little I had told him. Just enough to pique his interest, I wondered? After all the months without hearing anything about him or from him, to find Buchanan alive and working was like a balm on my soul. I was relieved to discover he was relatively healthy, but I would need to find out what he’d been doing since the end of the war … particularly why he was no longer in the Navy. I glanced back once to watch for a moment, as he began directing the unloading of freight. I was really looking forward to meeting him later.
Reconnecting With The Past

“It's been a long time,” I reply, when what I really want to do is ask her what she's been doing for the past fifteen years. If she still drinks tea with milk and lemon. If she's happy. — Jodi Picoult, My Sister’s Keeper

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name Erin – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of Iríngù-Ebízkur

♦ SMOKE HOUSE CAFÉ, DELTA WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

It had been nearly four hours since I had visited—well, ambushed, actually—Griffen Buchanan at the commercial freight yards in Alpha Ward, where the Celestial Viper had docked to offload her cargo of high-end manufactured goods from Bekenstein; Griff had agreed to meet me after his current duties on the freighter were done for the day. He told me he had to supervise the orderly unloading of the many pallets and containers within the Viper; as soon as the cargo hold was empty, he was going to shower and change before coming to meet me at this little eatery on 'restaurant row', outside the Alliance secured and controlled docks in Delta Ward.

I saw him as soon as he stepped inside, pausing just inside the door to look around for a moment until he spotted me. I was sitting at a small table near the back, totally lost in my thoughts as I sipped tea from a mug around which I had wrapped both my hands. The expression on his face as he looked at me, in this place, told me he probably remembered us sharing breakfast here once before … before the Reapers … before Sovereign. I watched him pause to speak with the young woman at the front counter … maybe to order a cup of coffee. Slowly strolling up to my table, he smiled as he leaned over slightly, saying, “Seems to me we have eaten in this place once before, Sammy. It has been a long day … mind if I take a load off?”

I momentarily grimaced at his observation. Any time our mission to that batarian-run shit hole in the Nemean Abyss was mentioned always brought back intensely distressing memories of Xiùlán —writhing in agony on the cold metal deck—after a batarian pirate had shattered her left thighbone with a point-blank shot from a heavy pistol. Attempting to smile in spite of the painful memory, I responded in what I hoped was a cheerful voice. “Buchanan! I’m really happy you chose to join me! …” Motioning across the table with my hand, I finished with, “By all means, pull up a chair, have a seat.” After I took another sip of what Griff now knew to be freshly brewed tea, I added in a subdued tone, “You have an excellent memory. We ate breakfast here while we were planning our mission to Cartagena Station.”

My suddenly cloudy expression gave way to another forced smile as Griff reached across the table to envelope my forearm with a huge … and surprisingly gentle hand. “I could be the most absent-minded man in the damned galaxy and I would remember that place, Sammy. It was a life-altering experience for me … we went through the gates of hell there, and actually managed to come out the other side with our asses intact … well, mostly intact … except for Xiùlán.”

His somber expression changed to one of surprise as he gave my arm a gentle squeeze, no doubt because he felt the hard edges of the composite-ceramic plate strapped to my forearm under the leather duster I wore whenever I was out and about. “It was only thanks to your efforts that we managed to get clear of that stinking hellhole. What about Xiùlán, by the way? Last I heard, she had been transferred from the Tokyo to the Hong Kong II, right before the invasion. How is she doing these days?”
Thinking about the beautiful … and deadly … third member of our team from back in the day, I placed my other hand on top of Buchanan’s before replying with a genuine smile … and more than a hint of pride. “She made captain first of the year, Griff … promoted and placed in command of the Hong Kong, all in the same day. I spent the evening with her last night, actually. Oh, and she still has a few scars on her left leg as souvenirs.” Looking straight into his greenish-gray eyes, I used an especially snarky tone to comment, “I’ll bet you still have a few scars from that trip as well.”

A touch of red instantly colored his ears before touching his cheeks. “Yeah, let’s not go there, alright?” he replied. “That is all in the past … best to leave it buried there.” We both looked up as the young waitress appeared with the cup of coffee he had ordered when he came in; of some surprise, she had also brought a fresh pot of tea; he nodded to indicate he had ordered it when he came in the door. After giving my arm another gentle squeeze, he retrieved his hand in order to pick up his own steaming mug to take a sip. Sighing in obvious pleasure, he commented, “When one is a crew member on a ship for any length of time, it is easy to get used to the bad coffee … to the point one no longer takes any notice of just how awful it tastes.” Taking another sip, he concluded, “This … is good coffee.” After a few more moments of silence, he asked, “So, are you going to explain why you needed to speak with me, or wait until after we eat?”

Finishing my cup of tea, I responded in a low voice. “I can tell you while we eat … some of it, anyway. If it’s okay by you, there’s a lot more that needs to be said … things I cannot discuss here in public, including the favor I need to ask of you … for that, I’ll need to speak with you in private.” I caught the attention of the waitress, then nodded at Griff as the petite woman walked up to stand beside the table. “I’m told the roast beef and potatoes here are really good … all the ingredients are brought in fresh from Eden Prime, or so they say.”

Griff nodded as he placed his order; I had placed my own order when I came in earlier, and had waited on him to arrive so we could have our meals together. When we were once again alone, Griff looked at me with one eyebrow raised, obviously curious about why I was being so mysterious. “Okay, Sammy. Talk to me … what is so damned important that you would ambush me on the docks? For that matter, how in hell did you even find me? I’ve not exactly been advertising my existence since I left the Alliance.”

“Well, since neither of us is in the Alliance anymore, let’s talk about you first,” I said with a reassuring smile. “Why in ’ell did you leave?”

Buchanan’s lips formed a tight, straight line for several moments before he began to speak. “Reaper War, obviously. I was injured … severely—damn near killed, actually—during the final battle in London. Got tossed aside like yesterday’s trash. Entire unit was obliterated by Reaper spawn; I have been told I am lucky to have survived. Had a concussion, several broken ribs, punctured lung, bruised liver, three vertebrae fractured, right side of my pelvis broken.” After taking another swallow of coffee, he gazed into his mug in silence, long enough for me to prompt him by nudging his hand.

Griff looked up. Fixing a solemn gaze on my eyes, he appeared to be expecting a look of pity, something I knew he would absolutely hate; all I had for him was sympathy … for the pain he had suffered, both physically and emotionally. Heaving a heavy sigh, he continued, “They could not put me back together like I was previously, Sammy. Missions we were assigned before the war would be out of the question for me now. I can no longer be a ground-pounder, you know? But I quickly discovered that sitting behind a desk every day, doing clerical work that seemed not to make any damned difference to anyone bored me nearly to tears. So after less than eight weeks of that particular kind of light duty, I opted to take the medical discharge they had offered.”
“Damn! I’m really sorry, Griff … that’s tough. I wonder if …” Without completing the thought concerning asari medical abilities, I asked, “Wasn’t there anything else you could do … some other assignment that required a bit more thought?” The chuckle I received answered my question perfectly, so I prompted him to tell me what he’d done after his discharge.

“Got a job as assistant cargo-master on a small freighter … MSV Seeker’s Sunrise; first-shift cargo-master was an older guy … former Alliance also, name of Curtis Mellor.” Griff shook his head slightly as he went on to explain why he was no longer on that ship. “Son-of-a-bitch suffered a core breech … exploded near the Utopia relay. No casualties, and obviously we were rescued, if that’s the correct word for it, by the Blue Suns.” With a short bark of laughter, he added, “Salarian owner all but accused Curt and me of sabotaging the damned engines. If I had grabbed him by his throat like I wanted, I would have needed to take on the rest of the damned crew.” He chuckled again, saying, “I really wish you had been there with me, Sammy … you could have handed their asses to all of them without breaking a sweat.”

I smiled at his unwavering confidence in my abilities. “Glad you think so highly of me, Buchanan.” My smile became a short chuckle before I added, “After surviving a close-quarters explosion—in the Blue Suns’ Delta Ward headquarters, no less—I’m still working my way back to a hundred percent. You wouldn’t know it to look at me, but I lost considerable muscle mass while I was in hospital.”

Before Griff could respond, our meals arrived; I began to eat as Griff explained to me—between bites of his roast beef and mashed potatoes—about the convoluted path he had taken to get to his current position on the Celestial Viper. “That is about all there is to know about me, Sammy. Pretty unremarkable, actually. Your turn now … just why did you leave the Alliance?”

We had finished our dinners and were enjoying our beverages—tea for me and coffee for Griff—as I finished speaking about my resignation, listing my numerous reasons for resigning from the Navy. When Griff didn’t comment, I took another sip from my cup before leaning in to speak in a near whisper, prompting Buchanan to lean in close so he could understand me. “I could really use your help, Griff.”

Griff’s response was apparently colored by his concern for my well-being. “What the hell, Samantha? You must realize that if it is within my power, I will do anything for you. Just tell me what you need.”

“Not here…” I frowned. “As I said, the possibility that someone might be listening in is too great for me to chance it. I need you to come with me, Griff … come to my apartment so we can speak privately. I cannot afford for us to be overheard.” I drained the last of the tea from my cup, stood from the table and said, “I’ll tell you everything … lay it all out for you, but I have to use caution.” After I paid the bill for our meals and drinks, I stepped outside and looked around for a few moments before turning back to Buchanan. Saying, “I think you’re going to like my new flat,” I hooked my arm into his and began walking to my speeder.

“Never known you to be so cautious, Sammy …” The worry was plain on Griff’s face and in his tone of voice. “This is a completely new side of you … something you’ve never shown before, and I am not really sure what to make of it.”

Without commenting on Griff’s concern, I leaned my body into his arm and steered him along beside me as I aimed our path towards a non-descript speeder parked in the middle of a row of similar looking vehicles. I activated my omnitool, unlocking and opening the canopy of the X3M that was now my personal transport on the Citadel. “Come on … it’s a short ride over to Bravo Ward.”
Once we were inside the speeder and on our way, I set the navi-computer to travel the pre-programmed route back to my rooftop parking structure before leaning back in my seat and looking at Griff as I began to explain all the secrecy. “I apologize for being so damned mysterious, Griff. I know it seems totally out of character for me, but…” I looked away for several moments, only returning my gaze to the man beside me upon hearing him softly clear his throat.

With a wry smile, I continued in a subdued voice. “I have … just recently … gained exclusive access to what many in the galaxy consider to be the most powerful information gathering network ever developed. It’s the main reason … among many … for my resignation from the Alliance. My captain on the Normandy … and Admiral Hackett … somehow believed I owed still more of my life to the Alliance, and that I should volunteer for this goddamned job … to be at their beck and call, under their fucking direction! Can you imagine what the Alliance would do with all that power?”

After pausing briefly to gather my thoughts, I continued. “With the blessing of the previous occupant of the position, I’m taking over as the new Shadow Broker, Griff.” Noticing his expression of shock and disbelief, I went on to explain how, after the war, all the Broker’s specialized equipment had been relocated from its previous location—which I did not reveal—and installed within a Destroyer-class Repository, providing a previously unattainable level of safety and security for the Broker’s main operating base.

Buchanan was absolutely speechless. I could see that dozens of questions were whirling through his mind as he stared at me in utter disbelief. “Damn, Sammy! You never did anything by halves in the past, and it seems you are still plowing along at full throttle.”

A warning trill from the navi-computer interrupted us, forcing me to stop talking as I concentrated on flying our final approach. Returning the speeder to manual control, I focused on bringing the X3M in for a precision landing inside a small parking structure on the roof of an unremarkable looking building in a mixed-use area of the Ward. After securing the speeder, I climbed out to ensure the large access door was completely closed and latched, then walked back past the craft to lead Buchanan down the circular stairs from the parking structure. Opening the door, I waved him in as I cheerily welcomed him to my new home. “Here we are.”

Buchanan slowly walked into the main living area of what appeared to be a very large apartment. I doffed my heavy cloak and laid it over a nearby chair as he slowly spun about in the middle of the room; he looked at me as I gently took his hand and pulled. “Come on … you need to see the rest of it.”

After showing Griff the bedrooms, each with its own private bathroom, along with the kitchen and main living area, he nodded in approval. “This is nice, Sammy … very nice indeed. So nice, I really cannot imagine that rent for this place is cheap.”

Replying with a shy grin, I answered, “Rent free, Griff. Bought and paid for by the previous Shadow Broker, as is the speeder we used. And that elevator …” I said, pointing to the spacious car exposed by the open doors where a normal entry door would exist, “… is a private conveyance for the exclusive use of this apartment’s residents. It’s always locked out from unauthorized ground floor access, whether I’m in here or not; the pass codes for the two Haptic interface lockouts reset automatically after each use … the algorithm is programmed into my omnitool.”

“I do not see any windows up here, Sammy. What if the power goes out … or is deliberately cut?”

“Lack of windows up here makes the building look like any other warehouse from the ground.
Here … let me just …” Triggering my omnitool, I made a couple of entries and pressed a control, resulting in the activation of the large, wall-mounted view screen with its display sectioned into ten zones. “Of those ten sectors,” I explained, “six of them present different views of the neighborhood around this building … the other four are duplicate views, but with infrared imagery.

I expanded my explanation by adding, “The cameras are placed all ’round, camouflaged by the overhang of the parapet. I can choose the view from any camera …” here I made the lower left section zoom to take over most of the screen, “and take a closer look at what’s happening.” Restoring the view to its previous configuration, I added, “The system passively monitors everything around here, and self-activates this monitor if anything out of the ordinary is detected … which should give me plenty of warning before things head south.”

“What happens when someone … umm, you know … maybe cuts power to the building?”

“Well, first off, the power for the entire building is on a separate, isolated circuit which can only be accessed by going through a Keeper maintenance tunnel.” I gestured toward a small hatch off to the side of the room but didn’t make any move to open it. “In addition, there’s an independent power source; it has just enough capacity to power the emergency lighting and the speeder access door up on the roof. It’s located inside that compartment, so can’t be cut at all unless whoever is after me has already made their way inside … which means something has gone terribly wrong and I am likely past the point of thinking about escape, so it would no longer matter.”

Nervously, I cupped my elbows in my palms as Buchanan looked around a bit more. “This is all pretty amazing, but there is not much in the way of personal gear here, Sammy, and not many clothes hanging in your closet … though, I do see you actually own a dress!” Smiling, he added, “It seems I need to revise my opinion of you, Traynor. Hard to imagine you wearing girl clothes … but, I’ll just bet you look absolutely stunning in that dress.”

“I’m really not sure … Xiülán said I was a knockout, but she couldn’t wait to get me out of it when we got back here from dinner.” Watching Griff’s ears redden and his cheeks flush, I thought, _Well shit, I did it again … made him blush twice in only a few hours’ time._ After a brief pause, I continued, “Who knows … I may even buy another dress or two, maybe a formal gown. Haven’t worn anything revealing like that since …” I could feel the change in my heart rate as the memory of being completely naked while five of my female classmates held me down so the boyfriend of one of them could rape me caused me to lose my train of thought. Feeling as if I was frozen in place, I stood there, eyes closed and my mouth partially open as the memory, every bit as raw and painful as the night it had happened, nearly overwhelmed my self-control.

I knew Griff had seen my eyes close and my face go pale when he softly asked, “Since what, Sammy?”

Shoving those awful recollections to the back of my mind, I forced myself to smile slightly as I finally found my voice and carefully said, “Well, since I was in college back on Earth.”

Cocking his head slightly, he changed the subject by asking, “So, all your fighting gear stored on the Reap… er, Repository?”

“Other than an emergency set-up in the X3M’s storage compartment … yeah. Cap’n Cody 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 Navy-issued SDU’s.”

Buchanan’s imagination must have got away from him for a moment, as his face again turned a faint shade of pink; he cleared his throat and looked intently at me, saying, “I am not exactly sure what learning about the dresses you are going to buy has to do with my reason for being here…
other than you seem to be avoiding getting to the real point… So, let me be direct… why in hell are you telling me all this, Samantha?"

**Dammit! I’ve been dreading this moment!** I met his eyes without hesitation and admitted, “Other than Xiùlán, you’re the only person I can trust to keep this secret, Griff … and I need your help.”

Buchanan’s doubts were all too plain in his expression; I gave him an uncertain smile, even as I continued to gaze at him intently. I could only hope that my next few words would provoke a positive outcome … for both of us. In a deadly serious tone, I huffed, “No bullshit, Griff. I don’t pretend to know exactly how everything will work out … this … being on my own?…” I raised my hands over my head for a moment before crossing my arms under my chest. “Taking over a huge information gathering network? Right now, the one thing I am sure of is that I desperately need … someone. I need help rebuilding the network of agents, and it is absolutely vital I have someone with me that I can trust watching my six … a person I can trust with my life.” He returned my steady gaze as he appeared to consider the implications of what I had just revealed. “Now it comes down to it… he’s going to have to agree to enter a fuckin’ Reaper. “I want that person to be you, Griff.”

“You haven’t shown me the Reaper, Sammy. Will we have to be working inside that thing?”

Hearing the hint of curiosity in his voice, I relaxed just a bit, responding with, “Repository, Griff. They never really considered themselves to be Reapers … that’s just a term the Protheans used to refer to them 50,000 years ago. Who knows what in ‘ell they were called before that. Anyway, they consider themselves to be Repositories … and guardians. Each of them carries all the knowledge of the civilizations they obliterated in the past … civilizations they harvested, to use their term for what they were doing.”

“You speak of them as if … I don’t know. It seems to me you actually admire them somehow.”

“I really haven’t thought about how I feel about them, big guy. I do know that Shepard’s choice of synthesis when she activated the Crucible … docked with the Catalyst … that is, the Citadel … radically changed their programming. Shepard completely eliminated their imperative to indoctrinate organics, Griff, and it cost her nearly everything.” Thinking about that green wave and the months spent getting back to civilization, I fell silent and looked at the floor with my hands clasped behind me.

I could tell Buchanan was watching the full range of emotions playing out across my face. He sighed as he moved to stand right in front of me; placing a hand on my upper arm, he squeezed my triceps gently. The warmth from his hand on my arm felt good … I hadn’t even realized I was cold. Grasping my chin with his other hand, he gently tilted my head back so he could look into my eyes. Even though I feared what I would see, I looked up at him, studying his intense grey-green eyes. “Okay, Sammy. I will not promise anything … but where is this … Repository … docked? I may as well have the entire tour … see what kind of frying pan you are asking me to jump into.”

My relief at his words left me in a gasp of air; I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath, waiting for him to reject the idea, to reject me. I managed to grin up at him in a cheeky fashion and exclaim, “I think you’ll be impressed, Griff. You and I have lived together in some pretty cramped quarters before … remember Spirit’s Rage?”

Griff chuckled at the memory of our shared time on the decidedly cramped, former turian corvette. He broke into a big smile as he replied, “Trying to work around each other—sleeping one above the other in those tiny bunks—straddling the toilet in order to take a shower?” With a grimace, he said, “I am still unable to find a bed aboard a ship that is big enough for me to comfortably sleep
in.” He released my arm, following as I turned and headed for the circular staircase. After helping me slip back into my leather duster, we started up, his voice drifted up from below me. “Would we have separate sleeping areas … and bathrooms?”

“No problem … there’s a lot more room inside Iringû-Eßizkur’s habitat area than there was in Spirit’s Rage. Two private bedrooms with baths—custom modified to suit and plenty of space for both of us to feel comfortable.”

Griff’s only response was, “Well … damn. I guess that is something in favor of this potential arrangement.”

♦ BRAVO WARD, AT LARGE • CITADEL ♦

There was scarcely enough time to pick up any speed before being forced to slow as I brought the X3M closer to my destination; I had signaled Iringû-Eßizkur to activate a homing beacon to prepare for our arrival. As soon as the navi-computer in the speeder acquired the beacon’s signal, I released the controls and sat back in my seat, to Buchanan’s apparent dismay. “Dammit Sammy, are you doing what I think? …”

I interrupted him by offering, “It’ll be fine, Griff. You can relax. Iringû-Eßizkur has just enough space available for this aircar, and her control of our approach is far more accurate than I could ever achieve.”

Buchanan shook his head slightly in disbelief as he watched the split-rear underside of the Destroyer draw steadily closer. He looked as if he was going to totally lose it when he saw an entry that appeared no larger than nine meters long by six wide—a space he obviously considered a rather paltry-sized opening. “That really does not seem like a large enough space, Sammy—this damn thing is a good eight meters long…”

“Seven and a half, actually. And you’ve probably noticed that the canopy has been modified to slide forward rather than tilt up … we can simply climb out once we’re inside … be patient, Griff.”

When the speeder’s forward motion transitioned to an angular climb between the Repository’s main body above and the ground locomotion engine to which all four legs were attached, several low-intensity lights came on to illuminate our parking area. As we cleared the lower edge of the opening, a pair of panels rapidly swung closed beneath us; the computer cut the power and the X3M settled onto the now tightly-closed and latched door panels beneath it. I toggled the canopy open and stepped out, motioning for Griff to follow me. “I kinda wish there was enough room to dock our old UT-47, but Irin’s eezo core and the circuitry for her prime weapon take a helluva lot of space. She actually surprised me with the ability to safely store a speeder.”

A round hatch irised open with a metallic hiss at the forward end of the compartment, prompting me to encourage the reluctant man along. “Come on … I think you’ll like her, Griff.”

Buchanan muttered, “I really wish you would quit referring to this thing as a ‘she’.”

What other pronoun would you have Samantha use to refer to me, Buchanan-Griffen? The voice was distinctly feminine … I couldn’t be sure how Griff was perceiving it, but I could definitely hear a sultry tone in Iringû-Eßizkur’s voice; it had the same tone as what I heard in Xiülán’s voice whenever we were alone together.

I looked at Griff and smirked as I led him up to the outer compartment while saying, “Pay Griff no mind, Irin. I don’t think he’s ever been near a Repository, let alone inside one.”
“Oh, I have been a lot closer to the goddamned things than I ever wanted to be … the Mako they blew up is how I got so badly injured at the end of the war.” As the entrance hatch to the habitat and broker compartment sections irised open, the sounds of music—incredibly ancient in origin—resumed playing at a low volume. “My God, Traynor … What in hell is that? I have never heard anything like it!”

I turned to look at Griff as I attempted to explain. “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 …” I raised my hands over my head to indicate the sounds coming from the hidden speakers, “… this music. It’s over 350-thousand years old.” Before he could reply, I moved to the small console at the edge of the Broker’s compartment and said, “Irin, I’d like you to welcome Griffen Buchanan … he’s the gentleman I had been searching for.”

The music continued to play a cheerful melody as Iringù-Eßizkur replied, «It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Buchanan-Griffen.»

“It is joking, right? It is a machine, Traynor. How can it feel pleasure about … anything?”

Despite my best efforts, my mouth fell open in shocked disapproval. “Griff, the Reapers were fully sentient, intelligent machines when they rolled in through the Kite’s Nest! As I said, Commander Shepard’s choice on the Crucible freed them from their imperative to indoctrinate organics; by so doing, she imbued each of them with a bit of her own DNA.” I held up two fingers, spread apart in a ‘vee’, pointing to my eyes. “Your eyes glow in the dark, as do mine—that’s a result of their nanites being grafted into our DNA. It’s one reason our injuries seem to heal so much faster than before.” Stepping further into the compartment, I added, “The only imperative Iringù-Eßizkur—hell, any of them—obeys now is to help organics … to help us! A Destroyer named Asharru shadows the Hong Kong everywhere Xiùlán takes the ship. Others are repairing the relays and planetary infrastructure, even as we speak.”

By now, Griff was holding up his hands in a seemingly vain attempt to get me to stop talking. “Okay! Okay, Sammy … I apologize … but you have to admit, all of this is really just … well, it is a bit much to take in all at once.” He looked around a bit before adding, “I think I need to sit down for a few minutes.”

Thinking his color didn’t look all that great, I motioned for him to follow me. “Let me show you the lounge, Griff.”

Apparently worried I would leave him alone inside this machine, he followed closely on my heels. Walking backwards into the lounge area, I watched as his eyes widened in wonder when he saw the upholstered chairs arranged along one wall, all facing what appeared to be a large view screen on the opposite side. Motioning for him to sit, he looked grateful to do so, choosing the chair closest to the entrance; he visibly relaxed as his eyes settled on the large monitor flush-mounted in the wall across from his chair. He took note of the chronometers—one beneath the display, displaying current GST, and another above, displaying a row of paired zeros with colons between each pair.

I placed a hand on the broad shoulder beside me and squeezed slightly. Standing beside the man, I could almost feel the waves of nervousness emanating from him as I explained, “The upper chronometer … the one that’s zeroed … is the ‘time-to-destination’ display. The monitor itself 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, I added, “Personal spaces are on either side of this area—yours would 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 me. “You seem pretty damned sure I am going to join you … work for you …”

I interrupted him with, “Not for me, Griff. You’d be working with me, as a full partner in this endeavor. There’s a huge difference … and I realize I’m asking a lot of you … asking you to have some faith and believe in me. I honestly believe we can do this … rebuild the network of agents, find and broker valuable information … provide a sorely needed service. The need is greater now, more than ever.”

I explained how I had used information uncovered with the installed equipment to help Captain Cody and Zaeed Massani by flushing from hiding—with Sandra Patton’s assistance—the batarian Solem Dal’Serah, enabling Massani to track him to Vido Santiago’s hiding place. “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 …” I paused as Buchanan held up his hand. “Sammy,” he said, voice sounding alarmingly tired. “I get it. Captain Bill Cody is hell-bent on eliminating the Blue Suns from existence, and it seems the Alliance is on board with that goal. That you were able to use …” he raised his hands to indicate Iringù-Eßizkur, “… the equipment inside this metal monster to track down the head honchos of the Suns is all the proof I need that you are dead serious about doing this.” Before I could comment, he added with a knowing smile. “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 responded with a chuckle, saying, “A bit sensitive for a machine, aren’t you?”

I chimed in, saying, “Irin, I don’t think Griff will be convinced during such a short visit.” Turning my attention to Buchanan, I said, “I don’t need an answer right away, Griff, but I do need to know your intentions … within the next few days, if at all possible.” With a brooding frown, I continued, “I’ll understand completely if you don’t wish to work with me again, especially since we would have to fend for ourselves without any kind of military backup.”

Buchanan, sitting back in the chair, seemed to relax slightly, even as he fell into a prolonged, pensive silence. I walked through the hatchway to the kitchen/dining compartment, opened the cooler and grabbed a couple of beers. Moving back into the lounge, I handed one to Griff, who murmured his gratitude before opening and taking a long pull from the bottle.

After several uncomfortably heavy—for me, anyway—minutes of silence and a couple more swallows of beer, he produced a loud belch before slowly getting to his feet. “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.”

After a couple of swallows from my own bottle, I quietly said, “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.” Raising my free hand, I pointed to the left side of the compartment and added, “Take a look in there. The bed is extra-long … it’s a custom size, made for a turian. You’re probably just as tall … and Irin can easily adapt it to any size, should you desire a bit more width.”

Buchanan grimaced, then moved to inspect the sleeping area as he polished off his beer. After several minutes, he reappeared in the hatchway, his voice carrying a touch of surprise … and awe, 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 like before … 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
Heaving a heavy sigh, I placed my hands on my hips as I replied, “Okay then. Come on … I’ll give you a ride back to the freight docks.” Picking up the empty bottles, I dropped them into a recycling tube before walking back towards the rear section with Buchanan following closely behind me. Once we were both inside the speeder, I activated the drive core and brought the craft to a hover as Iringû-Ebizkur opened the doors beneath us; I let the craft descend from the small compartment, then deftly spun it around and headed for the Alpha Ward freight docks.

Buchanan had been expecting a three-relay trip back to the Urla Rast system in the Shrike Abyssal, followed by a return trip to Bekenstein before docking at the Citadel; Captain Max Silva wanted to earn back some of the credits the repairs to the ship’s thrusters had cost him on Bekenstein. The revenue he could be paid for moving raw materials in the form of palladium and iridium, along with some platinum from Rosh, was too good to pass up. Rather than transfer the cargo from a volus owned hauler on Omega Station as he had previously done, Silva had contracted with the shipper to load the cargo in orbit over Talis Fia; this would net the Viper more credits for the run, and not having to pay the automatic ‘slice off the top’ to the station’s queen would mean even less overhead for the return trip.

Captain Silva had contracted for a back-haul of construction supplies to be delivered to the volus colony world; by keeping a tight schedule, the salarian hoped to maximize his profits for the round-trip. Buchanan had overseen the ship’s loading with an eye towards a minimal amount of time spent unloading at their destination, so felt confident he could turn the ship around in a day, despite the additional time needed to transfer cargo between ships in an airless, micro-gravity environment.

Buchanan had been mulling over my offer; during the six days the Celestial Viper spent in transit, he felt that he had come to a firm decision. He had contacted me after the task of unloading the Viper at Bekenstein had been completed, requesting that I meet with him after the ship returned to the Citadel; I had agreed to wait long enough for him to complete the last leg of the trip, with a warning that I absolutely had to have his decision as soon as he returned.

As often happens in life, Fate took a personal interest in Griffin Buchanan’s future.
assistant has been found to work in the cargo hold. Unfortunately for you, he is a fourth cousin; he insists it would be much more profitable for me to place him in total charge of the cargo hold on this ship. He is of the opinion that if you require an assistant, you must be incapable of adequately performing the tasks for which I have been paying you.”

The salarian looked down for a moment in apparent embarrassment before returning his gaze to Griff, who was employing a great deal of effort to maintain a neutral expression. “I have decided that you have made your last trip with us, human. You have done an excellent job for me during your solo residence in cargo, so just to be fair, I will pay you a generous severance… two months additional wages, at your current rate, along with a percentage of the wages I no longer had to pay to Surnal Gaemnor.” Looking at the datapad in Griff’s hand, he added, “It’s all right there, human.”

Buchanan stood, knowing his bulky frame was more intimidating that way; he placed the knuckles of both fists, each of which was easily the size of two, maybe even three salarian hands, on the desk and leaned over to look straight into Max Silva’s eyes. With a grim smile, he quietly said, “The name is Buchanan … Griffen. Buchanan. And it will be four months wages, not two, or I will file an unfair labor practices grievance against you and this ship.” Drawing back, he shifted his gaze between Votol and Silva as he added, “Any complaint I file against a salarian might ultimately be ignored, but do you really want to take a chance on having your ship locked down while the litigation grinds its way through the system? Could be months before the Celestial Viper sees space once again.”

Captain Silva’s mouth fell open as he blinked his large eyes in surprise. Finding his voice, he squeaked, “You wouldn’t.”

Buchanan rose to his full height, seeming to fill the small compartment from wall-to-wall as he cocked back on one hip, crossed his arms across his massive chest and replied in a deathly low voice, “Oh, but I would. It would appear Gaemnor was not the only salarian on this barge with a low opinion of humans. Four months wages, or this fucking ship sits idle for the next six months.”

Silva looked at Votol for several moments before returning his attention to the enormous human standing over him. “Three months wages, and the percentage I previously offered.”

Griff thought about it for a moment before holding the datapad out and saying “Done. Make the entry so I can get the hell off this tub.” Silva carefully activated his omnitool and, hands shaking with nervousness, made several entries before pressing his right thumb to the interface. Griff looked at the new totals on the display; satisfied, he nodded and dismissed the pair with, “Too bad for you it was humans … and turians … and the krogan … that kept the Reapers from handing the salarian race their cloacae.”

Griff smiled at the stunned pair, nodded his head, then turned and stalked out of the captain’s cabin. Looking at the datapad as he moved down the passage to his quarters, he thought, Guess he figured I really would complain to the shipping authorities if he had been any less generous ... not that I was getting rich on what he paid me. As he entered his quarters, he chuckled to himself. Son of a bitch actually did me a favor! I would not have received any severance at all if I had walked in and simply quit.

It was the work of only a few minutes for him to gather and pack his clothing and few possessions; that done, he left the ship through the open cargo hold. Walking to the side of the path taken by the several lifts beginning to bring cargo aboard, he used his body to roughly shove the new salarian cargo master out of his path as he walked down the ramp. Once inside his apartment, he
placed his travel packs on the foot of his bed. With the realization beginning to sink in that his employment had been abruptly terminated, he thought, ‘Better contact Sammy before she rescinds her offer.’

Taking a seat in the rickety chair by his bed, he carefully entered the address for my omnitool; when I didn’t respond to his audio-chat request, he sent me a text message:

Traynor. I am off the Celestial Viper ... for good. My job was terminated, just because I am a human. I am still having a difficult time wrapping my head around your unconditional trust in that Reaper, Sammy, but what the hell ... I will join you. I will be in my apartment in Alpha Ward. Perhaps we can meet for dinner? The salarians gave me a rather generous severance payment, so it will be my treat this time! Hope to hear from you shortly. Buchanan.

Pressing send, he decided to take a shower and change his clothes while awaiting my reply.
We Are Where We Were

Here are the things I want for you - I want you to be happy. I want someone else to know the warmth of your smile, to feel the way I did when I was in your presence. I want you to know how happy you once made me and though you really did hurt me, in the end, I was better for it. I don’t know if what we had was love, but if it wasn’t, I hope to never fall in love. Because of you, I know I am too fragile to bear it. I want you to remember my lips beneath your fingers and how you told me things you never told another soul. I want you to know that I have kept sacred, everything you had entrusted in me and I always will. Finally, I want you to know how sorry I am for pushing you away when I had only meant to bring you closer. And if I ever felt like home to you, it was because you were safe with me - I want you to know that most of all. — Lang Leav, Lullabies

GST – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

Huódié dāo – [蝴蝶刀] – butterfly sword (knife in English)

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-Elīzīkur’

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)

Qíngrén – [情人 – lover]

Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ CITADEL · AT LARGE ♦

I would have bet nearly anything that Griffin Buchanan would not wish to join me; he seemed to be quite happy working as a cargo-master on the Celestial Viper, and he had been decidedly less than enthusiastic at the idea of spending any time working—to say nothing of possibly being required to occasionally live—inside a former adversary. Still, I could not keep a self-satisfied smile from erupting on my face as I quickly composed and sent a reply to his note. I had really hoped to have an answer from him before the end of the week … thankfully, the salarian owner of the Viper had unknowingly tipped Buchanan’s hand in my favor. After setting the purchases from my shopping trip on the dining table, I climbed back up the circular staircase to the rooftop shelter where my speeder was parked.

In less than twenty minutes I was over the freighter docks in Bravo Ward; as I banked into a tight circle overhead, I gazed down at the docks in an attempt to visually locate the Celestial Viper among the many Kowloon Class vessels in port. As I continued to slowly orbit the area, I set the speeder's locator-receiver to the specific frequency of Buchanan’s omnitool; I had loaded and saved his ident-code years ago—before our Ø7 program had been terminated—so I was rather surprised to almost immediately be rewarded with a signal that was unmistakably from Griff.

Actually, I found it more than a bit troubling that the man had never thought to change his code, especially after all the shit we’d been through while working for General Park; I slaved the X3M’s flight controls to the signal, enabling the speeder to fly directly to a parking area near the housing
complex where Griff was staying. After parking the speeder, I walked into the building, climbed a narrow staircase and proceeded down a dimly lit passageway. Stopping in front of his door, I closed the interface on my tool and used my knuckles to rap lightly on the door’s surface.

When the door sections slid into their pockets to reveal my rather large friend, I cocked my head, looked up into a pair of greenish-grey eyes and commented with a slight chuckle, “Looks as if your ship left without you, Griff.”

He grinned back at me and snarked, “Damn, Sammy! What a surprisingly accurate observation. It would seem you have this information gathering business down cold.” He turned, grabbed his packs from his bed and joined me in the narrow passageway.

Walking a step ahead of him, I commented over my shoulder, “I was just a bit surprised … pleased, for sure, but still … surprised to get your message.” After preceding him down the stairs, I added, “What happened to your job on the Celestial Viper?”

Griff chuckled as I led him back to my speeder. “Seems the Viper’s captain found a salarian that would take over the cargo-master’s position for a bit less than I was being paid; Captain Silva paid me what I was owed, plus three months wages as severance. Hired a cousin to replace me … he was loading cargo as I walked off the ship.” He chuckled again, then continued softly, “It will probably turn out for the best, Sammy—neither the owner nor his XO are too keen on humans.”

“His loss is definitely my gain, but only if you’re truly serious about joining me,” I said with a genuine smile. “You think you can get used to flying around in a Reaper turned Repository?”

“No … at least, not immediately. Those things did massive amounts of damage, Sammy, galaxy wide. It is still difficult for me to accept that they are helping all the races rebuild, even knowing they are the reason that Commander Shepard walks among us again.”

Reaching the speeder, I activated the entry protocols and slid the canopy forward; Griff tossed his packs into the rear, then climbed in to sit beside me. I powered up the small mass effect core and propulsion system while the canopy slid closed and latched over our heads; Buchanan settled back in his seat as I brought the speeder up and around for the flight back to Delta Ward.

Glancing at my companion as we flew, I said in a soft voice. “Shepard’s on Thessia, joining in a matrimonial bond with Liara T’Soni.” Shaking my head, as if still in disbelief at the recent turn of events, I added, “All the equipment and properties the previous Shadow Broker owned has been left for me … for us … to use. Iringù-Eßizkur has assured me she will be as faithful to me as she was to my predecessor.”

Griff was silent for several minutes. Finally speaking as we crossed the Presidium Ring on our way to my apartment, he voiced another doubt in a hesitant tone. “You know, Sammy … it occurred to me while I was waiting for you … a woman of your talents, having access to the specialized equipment aboard Iringù-Eßizkur, could have very easily engineered that salarian’s offer to steal my job on the Viper.”

Stunned, I looked at Buchanan in slack-jawed amazement. When he remained uncomfortably silent, I replied as calmly as I could, “Griff, if you think for one second that I would do such a thing to you, after all the time we spent together on missions, then this partnership isn’t going to work. I used my equipment to locate you … to locate the ship that employed you, and that’s all I did.” Returning my gaze outside as the speeder began slowing for a landing, I continued without looking at him. “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 … loyalty? Desperation? I didn’t … I couldn’t do that to you, Buchanan! Dammit, you’re my friend, and there are few enough people in my life about
which I can say that. I wouldn’t have been able to live with the guilt if I had …” I huffed in exasperation. “Sabotaging your position on that ship never even occurred to me!”

Shaking my head as I flew the X3M the last hundred meters to settle into the rooftop shelter, I turned to look at him before shutting the systems down. “Griff, look at me.” When he reluctantly turned his eyes to meet mine, I met them 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, I hardened the scowling stare on my face as I ground out, “Are you in, or out … a hundred percent … or nothing.”

I could see the flush rising from inside his collar to crawl up his neck and encircle his ear as he looked down and away in embarrassed silence. After a number of tense moments, he looked at me once again. “Traynor, I am truly sorry. I should know better, and I apologize for even thinking you might have had a hand in me losing my job.” He reached over in a hesitant manner, offering his right hand. “You have always been straight up with me … hell, you saved my life on Cartagena Station, so yeah … count me in … a hundred percent … whatever you need me to do.”

Despite my bluster at his accusation, I was so damned relieved all I could do was grin idiotically as I gripped his huge 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.” I finished shutting down the X3M’s systems, climbed out of the speeder and insured the outer access door was latched and locked, then unlocked the stairwell and started down, followed by a very quiet Buchanan.

Once we entered the apartment and I locked the door behind us, Griff met my eyes once more. “Alright, Sammy. If I am going to be doing this, you and I 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 apparent nervousness as he continued in a subdued voice, “You no doubt remember me telling you I am not the same man as before, Sammy. I cannot run ops on the ground anymore … in all likelihood I would only get one or both of us killed.”

I looked at him in quiet sympathy, waiting to see if he wanted to explain further. Seeing no pity in my eyes, he visibly relaxed … just a little, but remained silent. Hoping to make him feel better about the deal, I responded, “I nearly died during my last op, Griff; I have no intention of either of us ever again being field operatives. My initial idea was for me to become the information director while you directed the military ops, but we’re partners, so nothing is set in stone. There are Broker teams out there, simply waiting for new instructions. Our first job will be to get the network back up and fully operational … then, we find customers and put the teams to work gathering the info we need. Simple as that.”

“You make it sound so damned easy, Sammy,” Griff replied as he looked at me; his skepticism all too obvious in expression and tone. “But I know it will be anything but.”

Grinning at his observation, I replied, “But it really won’t be that difficult either, because all the hard work has already been done. We just have to step in and pick it back up, just like what happened after Shepard and her squad eliminated the previous Broker.”

“And, I assume our job will be easier because your predecessor is still alive … and possibly willing to help us with the transition?” Griff raised an eyebrow and, for the first time, the start of a smile began to creep onto his face.

Smiling hopefully in return, I chuckled lightly before answering, “Yes, my predecessor is very much alive, and will be enjoying a well-deserved—and long delayed—vacation.”
Buchanan nodded in acceptance, his overall demeanor brightening as he replied, “Alright. Not like we will be ready to go anytime soon, anyway. Seems I have a lot to learn, so how about we get started?”

Grinning, I said, “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.”

♦ BRAVO WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Once Buchanan had stored his gear, we made a quick trip over to Iringû-E'Brien, where I spent the remainder of the morning going over the Brokerage processes and systems in great detail. Since Griff had never seen the systems before, much less used them, I demonstrated the same techniques I had initially learned while assisting Liara aboard the Normandy. Much to my relief, Buchanan proved to be a quick study, making me confident that, in time, we could become as good a team now as we had been in the past … maybe even better, once Griff became more familiar with the systems and we figured out the balance between our new distribution of responsibilities.

After returning to the apartment to enjoy a midday lunch, we began to actually work; I assembled the components for the new relay transmitters as Buchanan sorted and put away some of his clothing and gear. He was walking past the small table near the elevator when he spotted something he had failed to notice during his brief visit the previous week. “Hey Sammy … how long have you had this?”

After looking up to see what Griff was referring to, I answered offhandedly, “Since shortly after Cap’n Cody assumed command of the Normandy; it belonged to Spectre Shepard … a gift from Aria T’Loak. Shepard knows how much I enjoy playing chess, so rather than keep it for herself and allow it to simply gather dust, she told Cody he could give it to me. Pretty nice, don’t you think?”

Griff was actually bent down, studying the elaborate appearance of the set. “It’s extremely nice, Sammy, and not something one sees every day.” I could guess he was taking note of the wooden case under the ranks and files of inlaid wooden squares, and the game pieces of carved and polished ebony and crystal. “It probably cost a small fortune when it was new, in case you didn’t know.”

I had to grin at that statement. “Middle of the damned war, Shepard assisted Aria in retaking Omega Station from Cerberus. When Aria was once again in control of the station, she … appropriated … that chess set from its former owner—a Cerberus general named Oleg Petrovsky—I guess Aria felt she owed the commander something tangible for her assistance.”

“I had heard rumors … stories … that Cerberus had their claws in Omega … sounds like the stories were all true,” Griff replied. “Good thing Shepard was able to lend a hand in taking it back.”

I was finalizing some rather delicate connections on the main circuit board of the relay transmitter, so remained silent for several minutes. When finished, I looked up at Griff. “Cerberus wanted control of Omega Station so they could monitor the Omega-4 relay. The Illusive Man’s scientists had found the destroyed remains of the Collector Base in the Galactic core and were conducting some really twisted experiments; even unleashed some of their results on the station. From what Shepard reported when she returned, it was some pretty horrific shit. Having Aria back in charge of that place is a helluva lot better for everyone than it would have been if Cerberus had stayed.”

I walked over to stand beside Griff, sighing as I looked at the game set. “I managed to convince
Shepard to play against me one time—on a small, portable set I owned—shortly after we left Mars.” The memories from that time in my life caused me to giggle. “Kicked. Her. Ass! Hard. She couldn’t seem to use her pawns to simply run interference … kept offering them up to me like sacrificial lambs.”

Griff chuckled as well. “You and I will have to play sometime, Sammy. I’ll admit to being rusty, but maybe I can give you a a bit of competition.”

Grinning at his offer, I moved back to the table I was using as a workbench. Picking up another set of loose components, I began assembling a rather special transceiver—a present I intended to give to a rather special person.

Following me over, Griff commented, “You always were better with all the tech gizmos than I ever was … or could be.” Flashing me a quick grin, he added, “When you’re done, I need to do some shopping. I have to update my current weapons mods and, if we’re gonna have two bases of operations … here and that infernal machine … I want to buy some additional set-ups, so I don’t find myself at one place or the other without everything I need.”

Without looking up from my work, I answered in an offhand manner. “That makes a lot of sense. You can get that done when I’m done here, when I head out to Irin to install everything.”

It was late afternoon by the time I was ready to take my newly assembled components to Iringù-Eßizkur for installation and testing. Before leaving the apartment, I gave Griff a copy of the door and elevator algorithms needed to operate the locks to get back in. I also had him change his omnitool’s ident-code, explaining to him how easy it had been for me to track him at the freighter docks. “That complacency has to change, Griff,” I explained in an earnest voice. “I don’t want anyone tracking you to this location or to Iringù-Eßizkur; there’s too much at stake, for both of us.” Grabbing one of his hands, I looked up at him intently. “You have to change your mindset … back to the way we operated when we were on missions together.”

Buchanan blushed as he said, “I am sorry, Sammy. I have not had to think like that since before the war. I spent ten weeks in a hospital bed recovering from my injuries, and I explained that when I could not return to my former active duty position, I elected to take a medical discharge. Not much reason to be stealthy on a damned freighter.”

I gave his hand a squeeze before releasing it with a smile. “I realize that, Griff. But it’s important for you to realize just how alone we really are now. Except for Cartagena Station, we’ve never had to do clandestine work without some form of backup.” Heading for the stairs to the roof, I said, “I’ll see you back here in a few hours. If everything goes well, I’ll be stopping over at the Alliance docks to see Xiùlán before I return.” Turning back to face him as he entered the elevator, I activated my omnitool and said, “I’m transferring some credits to you … along with the location of a capable—and very discreet—gunsmith. Tell ‘im I sent you … he’ll be happy to supply you with what you’re looking for, at a reasonable price, and no questions asked. Have fun.”

Griff gave me a rather cheeky salute as he closed the doors, saying, “I’ll do that. Thanks.”

♦ SYSTEMS ALLIANCE DOCK C-7, BERTH 04 · CITADEL ♦

Despite some initial misgivings, the installations inside Iringù-Eßizkur had gone remarkably well; having completed the work a bit sooner than anticipated, I had traveled to the Alliance’s frigate docks in order to visit with the captain of the SSV Hong Kong. After parking my speeder outside the fence, I submitted to a cursory search of my person before being handed a large badge bearing the word VISITOR in large letters and being allowed to proceed.
With the badge clipped to the collar of my dark leather duster, I entered the docks and began walking towards the *Hong Kong*, docked in the berth to the port side of the *Normandy*; my path was far from a straight line due to the number of people working on the dockyard and the haphazardly placed freight pallets and containers that I needed to dodge. As I was beginning to walk under the nose of my former posting, I paused for a moment upon spotting a Marine walking down the deployed hanger-bay ramp. Something about the soldier’s profile looked familiar; upon closer inspection, I was thrilled to discover the Marine was Sandra Patton. “Sandee,” I called out, waving a hand. I waited for the Master Gunnery Sergeant to draw closer before saying, “It’s so good to see you! How are you doing?”

Sandee surprised me by wrapping her arms around me in a warm hug. Releasing me after a quick peck on the cheek, she replied, “Super … still on light duty, but Commander Cortez is keeping me busy. Walk with me?”

I fell into step beside the woman as she continued to speak. “The ship finally has a proper inventory of all the small arms on board, and I’ve been running the Marines through drills and live fire exercises in the practice arena.”

Grinning, I inquired in a snarky tone, “And … just how, exactly, does that equate to light duty?”

“Oh, I’m not running *with* them … at least, not yet,” came the rejoinder. “I get to stalk the sidelines and shout instructions … and criticisms, while they work.” With a chuckle, she added, “Probably as close as I’ll ever get to being a backfield commander.”

As we drew abreast of the *Hong Kong*’s nose, I grabbed Patton’s upper arm and pulled lightly as she stopped walking. “I’m here to see Xiùlán, Sandee. Where are you off to? You look a bit more dressed up than usual.”

Patton blushed slightly as she grinned and said, “Against my better judgement, I’m going to meet Zaeed … have a few drinks, a quiet dinner … and talk.” Responding to the doubt that immediately clouded my expression, she quickly added, “He was the one asking me, Sammy. I want … I need … to hear what he has to say.”

Shaking my head minutely from side-to-side once, I responded with, “I can’t imagine him inviting you to dinner just to rip your heart out again, Sandee.” Grasping one of Patton’s hands, I added, “That said, don’t let ’im, okay? I know you like ’im … maybe even think you love ’im, but dammit, I believe you can do so much better. Just … be on your guard … please?”

Patton smiled; pulling me close, she hugged me again, a bit more intimately than before. “I’ll be careful, Sammy,” she whispered in my ear. “He hurt me once, and he knows it. I don’t think he’ll hurt me again.” Releasing me, Patton turned and headed for the gate. “Don’t be a stranger,” she called over her shoulder.

The Marine standing guard outside the *Hong Kong*’s hanger ramp had recognized me as I approached his position, so had relayed notice of my impending visit to the OOD. As I approached his position at the bottom of the access ramp, a tall goddess with long hair the color of ebony strode out of the hanger bay and walked down the ramp towards me. When we were within a few paces of each other, Xiùlán called out, “Sà mǐ! Why didn’t you call me? I would have met you at the gate.”

Her cheeky grin was pure joy to my soul, as I am sure mine was to hers; it was an indication that I was doing well since parting company with the Alliance. “No real need, as long as the perimeter guards will allow me access,” I explained. “When that changes, I’ll let you know, after I send a written protest to Admiral Hackett.” As Xiùlán stopped in front of me, her grin grew wider. “Of
course, he’ll probably tell me to go pound sand, but that’s fine,” I added softly. “I no longer work for the Alliance, and I certainly owe them nothing for the way I was treated.”

Xiùlán grabbed my free hand and led me several meters away from the ship. Turning to face me, my qíngrénn placed a rather chaste kiss on my forehead and whispered, “The implication being you’ll not sell them information? Or place a premium price on whatever you do sell?” The grin I gave her in reply was all the answer she required, so she changed the subject; looking at the package I was carrying, she asked, “What’s in the case, Sà mǐ?"

“A present for you. Take the case, Ai [愛 - Love (my meaning was ‘Luv’)] … it contains a secure transceiver. It can utilize the Hong Kong’s antenna array to connect to the comm buoys, and can decode any encrypted message I send you, wherever you might be in the galaxy. Any message you need to send to me will be automatically encrypted prior to transmission. It’s a secure way for us to communicate, and no other ship in the galaxy will have one, not even the Normandy.”

Xiùlán shook her head minutely, saying, “Not here, Sà mǐ. Too open, too public, even if these docks are controlled by the Alliance military. I’ll need to meet you somewhere a bit more … private. Send a time and location to my omnitool, darling; I’ll come see you. I’m sure you weren’t followed, and I’ll be sure I’m not tailed when I leave the ship.” Placing another chaste kiss on my forehead—what the fuck is up with that?—she said, “Nǐ de ài wǒ de shēnghuó wánzhěngle.” [你的愛使我的生活完整了—Your love makes my life complete.] Turning, she slowly walked back to her ship, leaving me with an aching heart as I stood rooted to the spot. After watching her for several moments, I turned around to walk back the way I had come. Thinking, Must be something happening on these docks I’m unaware of … and that’s a situation I cannot allow to continue.

Once outside the fence and back inside my speeder, I made a quick call to Griff to obtain his location; relieved that he was ready for a ride home, I made the brief detour to pick him up, then traveled a circuitous route back to the apartment, doubling back on my path several times to ensure we weren’t being followed. While traveling, I quizzed Griff concerning his acquisitions; he explained he had purchased several weapons from my recommended dealer—the goal being to possess enough weapons that he would never be completely unarmed, whether inside Iringù-Eßizkur or inside the apartment.

Before descending the circular staircase to our residence, he dropped one of his two newly acquired bags just inside the doorway, intending to store the weapons and gear contained within it inside the Repository as soon as I traveled back to confirm the installations and connections of my new equipment. Once inside the apartment, I used my omnitool to send Xiùlán a location and time for us to meet; I was anxious that my amantia have the device in her possession before the Hong Kong needed to depart on its next assignment.

♦ RESTAURANT ROW NEAR THE DOCKS, DELTA WARD · CITADEL ♦

Still on light-duty restrictions, Sandra Patton had been permitted an evening ashore; she walked into the lobby of the same restaurant where she had previously dined with Zaeed, shortly before Samantha Traynor had joined them to assist in gaining access to Solem Dal’Serah’s offices in the Blue Suns Delta Ward headquarters.

Studying the patrons in the dining area failed to reveal the presence of Massani, so she turned her attention to the bar; after a few moments of looking, she saw him leaning on the far end of the counter. Walking up to stand beside him, she brushed his shoulder with hers as she leaned on the bar with crossed arms, then looked at him and asked with a smile, “Buy a girl a drink?”
Without looking at her or acknowledging her arrival, he held a finger up to get the bartender’s attention; raising his own glass of English Stout, he pointed a thumb at Sandee, then polished off the remainder of his own glass. Finally turning to look at her, he remarked, “Hi, Luv. We’ll just ’ave a pint ’ere together, if yew don’t mind … then we kin get a table, ’ave some dinner?”

“Sure, that’d be great.” Still unsure about the status of their relationship after he had left while she was hospitalized, she decided to take it slow. “It’s good to see you again, Massani. What’s been happening with you since we last spoke?” Lame, Sandee! My god, get it together! she thought as he grinned back at her.

“Been researchin’ the few records you an’ Traynor got out of Dal’Serah’s office before dat bomb exploded. Found some leads on more Blue Suns ops in the Terminus Systems.” Zaeed rubbed the scarred side of his face for a moment, then continued with a tired sigh. “I’m was ’opin’ to speak wiv Specialist Traynor, see if she can use some ov dat ’igh-end equipmen’ inside Iringù-Êbizkur ter dig a bi’ deeper.”

Patton picked up the glass that had appeared in front of her and took a swallow before replying. “Come on, Zaeed … let’s go get a table and order our meals. I just saw Sammy, and I have a bit of news you’ll need to hear concerning her.”

Silently nodding his head, Zaeed picked up his glass of stout and—of real surprise to Sandra—extended his arm for her to grasp, before leading the way into the dining area. After the pair were seated at a surprisingly secluded table, she ordered a dinner similar to what she’d enjoyed during her previous visit, while Massani ordered fish and chips and another glass of English Stout.

“So, what news do yew ’ave concerning Specialist Traynor?” He took a couple of swallows from his glass while waiting for her reply.

Getting right to the point—no beating around the bush. With a small sigh, Patton replied, “The specialist resigned her commission in the Systems Alliance, Zaeed, shortly before I was discharged from the hospital.” She went on to explain the reasons for Traynor’s seemingly rash act, concluding with, “Sammy felt that Iringù-Êbizkur—and the equipment inside her—was too damned rare and important to allow it to be used for the exclusive benefit of the Systems Alliance, or any other galactic agency.”

She paused as their dinners were brought to the table; alone once more, she continued her explanation by telling Massani just how capable Samantha Traynor was as a soldier. “I’ve never seen her equal, Zaeed—she’s completely ruthless against batarians—a stone-cold killer; saved my ass in that place at least twice, then managed to send a distress call to the Normandy.”

Zaeed chuckled. “Haven’t come across that many people what don’t ’ate squints; Dal’Serah was still alive when I found ’im, so I don’t think ’e told Vido exactly what ’appened in Delta.”

Sandra nodded her understanding as she continued, “I believe Sammy received some scary intense training back before the war; she told me most of her pre-war service records have large portions redacted. The brass wanted her to …” raising her hands, she made ‘air’ quotes with her fingers as she continued, “… volunteer … to serve as a data-broker inside that Repository. When Captain Cody and Admiral Hackett declined to fix her records, she handed Cody her resignation.”

Zaeed had applied himself to his dinner and beer while Patton was speaking. Taking her pause as an opportunity, he asked in a low voice, “So, yew tellin’ me she’s gon’a be da new Shadow Broker?” He took a bite of potato, followed by a swallow of beer as he thought about everything Patton had just told him. “I suppose that means I’ll ’ave ter pay ’er fer any information she manages ter turn up fer me, eh?”
Sandra smiled as she responded, “I don’t see how she can just give it away, Zaeed. She’s working for herself now, so needs creds same as everyone else. Information is power—it takes time and resources to obtain. Besides being a total bad-ass with blades and guns, Sammy’s intelligent … one of the smartest people I’ve ever met. There’s no doubt in my mind that she’ll become an insanely good data-broker.”

Zaeed grunted as he finished eating the fish before draining his glass. After wiping his mouth and hands, he sat back and said, “You’re probably correct. I knew ’aving that asset fer free an’ all wouldn’t last.” The next thing he said nearly made Patton choke on the beer she was getting ready to swallow. “So, let’s talk about us, Luv.”

After a small coughing fit to clear the bits of liquid that had found their way down her windpipe, she gasped, “What about us, Zaeed? As I recall, you made your feelings pretty damned clear in the hospital.” Patton couldn’t be sure in the dimly lit restaurant, but Massani seemed discomfited … his face appeared to be a ruddy shade of red that couldn’t simply be attributed to his alcohol consumption.

Leaning forward, Zaeed reached across the table to gently grasp a soft hand. “I owe yew an apology, Luv. I realize I mos’ likely broke your ‘eart in dat ‘ospital, an’ I’m really sorry. Yew deserve better than dat … yew deserve better’n me.”

He looked down as Patton replied, “Zaeed … What I truly deserve is honesty. I really believed you had some feelings for me. Dammit to hell, Zaeed! I’ll just come out with it! I think I’m in love with you! Not the ‘get-married-live-happily-ever-after’ kind of love either … it’s…” Her voice hitched and tears began slowly trickling down her cheeks. With a great deal of effort, she managed to finish in a nearly normal tone of voice, “I don’t know how to explain it, how to put it into words, okay? You’ve spent so much of your life alone, and maybe that’s been okay for you. I can understand you not wanting to lower your barriers … you’re afraid to let anyone in … afraid to let me in, afraid you might lose your edge.”

She swiped at the tears on her cheeks; studying him in the dim light, she whispered, “I will not cost you your edge, Zaeed, and I think you need me … but, if you truly have no feelings for me … no room in your heart for me, then look me in the eye and say it. Please, tell me now. Don’t leave me hanging.”

Massani continued to hold Patton’s hand while she was speaking; now, he looked at her intently, the piercing blue of his left eye seemingly boring into her soul. “Sandee, yew wan’ da truth, do you? Fine then … ’ere i’ is. Hearin’ ’ow close yew came ter dyin’ in dat Blue Suns ’ellhole scared me shitless! It was my goddamned vendetta against da Suns what got you … an’ yeah, Samantha Traynor … in that situashun. Yew need ter understand why I ain’t ’eld anyone close ter me fer over twen’y fuckin’ years. I wouldn’t be able ter carry on if me actions had got yew killed, understand? Your death would ’ave been da end of me, Sandra … it would have absolutely broken me.”

Patton stared at the old merc for several moments as she thought of everything she’d just been told. Massani had bared his soul to her, something she had never expected. Choosing her words with great care, she replied, “Zaeed … I had no idea. What you just told me? You do realize you getting killed in the Terminus would have had a similar effect on me, don’t you?” She squeezed the gnarled hand holding hers. “I didn’t go into that hellhole with the expectation of dying, Zaeed. Until that explosion, I never felt my life was in any real danger. But you were not responsible for that, you stupid old coot!”

Massani stared at her in stunned disbelief for several moments, before leaning back in his chair;
much to Patton’s annoyance, he started to laugh. Noticing the look on her face, he tried to contain
himself with his free hand over his mouth, but continued to chortle while attempting to explain. “In
all me years, I ain’t never been called an old coot! I’ll admi’ ter bein’ stupid where i’ concerns
relashunships, but really? An ‘old coot’?” Saying the words brought on another round of honest
laughter, such that Patton gradually joined in.

He wiped the tears from his cheeks as he managed to regain control, prompting Sandra to remark
with a chuckle, “Damn, Zaeed. I never dreamed I’d ever hear you laugh, especially like that. One
might almost think capturing Santiago and Dal’Serah has changed you—for the better, I might
add.”

Zaeed had finished his meal; taking the last swallow of stout from his glass, he caught the eye of
their waiter; Massani asked about credits owed for the meals and beverages, then took care of the
bill before Patton could protest. By way of explanation, he said, “Alliance Navy was rather
generous in coverin’ me expenses on Susskind Station. Least I can do is pay fer yer dinner. Come
on … Let’s push off. I’ll walk wiv yew back ter da Normandy.”

Zaeed paused at the guarded checkpoint near the Alliance docks where the Normandy and Hong
Kong were berthed; turning towards Patton, he started to simply say good night when she threw her
arms around him and hugged him tight. “Dammit, Sandee,” he whispered in her ear. “I need ter
tell yew somethin’.”

Patton pulled back slightly while keeping her hands on his shoulders and waited silently as she
stared into his eyes.

Tipping his head down, he unabashedly studied the impressions of her breasts under her blouse,
pressed up against his chest, as he said in a soft voice, “Yew know dat Vido paid ‘is blokes ter ‘old
me down while ’e put a goddamned bullet in me ‘ead. I s’pose I’m lucky ter ‘ave lived through it,
but there was some side effects … shit I ain’t never shared wiv anyone … certainly not a woman …”
here he hesitantly returned his one-eyed gaze to her face as he continued, “especially a bird
I’ve come ter care fer.”

Sandra could plainly see the old merc was unhappy with what he was about to share. “Zaeed, it
can’t possibly be that bad, whatever it is.” She grabbed both his hands; bringing them up to her
chest, she continued, “Just tell me, please. You have my word I won’t judge you.”

Massani was uncomfortably aware Sandra was lightly pressing the backs of his hands into the soft
fullness he had just been admiring. With a heavy sigh, he leaned in against her a bit harder,
enjoying the feel of her body, without feeling any effects from the contact. “Ever since dat day, I
ain’t been capable, Luv.” With an anguished look down at his hands, held prisoner against her
chest, he said, “I ‘aven’t been able ter lie wiv a woman fer over twenty fuckin’ years, me luv! I’m…”
Zaeed paused for a moment, as if what he needed to say was sticking in his throat. “I’m
impotent, is what.”

Stunned by his admission, Sandra took a moment before replying. “Zaeed, I am so sorry.” She
studied his face for a moment before asking, “Were you assuming my only reason for having
feelings for you was in order to have sex with you?” She lowered her eyes for a moment. When
she looked back up, there was conviction in her expression. “I don’t need you to make love to me,
Massani. Just knowing that you care for me … that I’m special to you … is enough. Just …
please don’t ever shut me out again, Zaeed. That really hurt me, ya know?”
Massani’s reaction was totally unexpected. Leaning in ever so slowly, he kissed her full on the mouth. Drawing back, he held his breath, waiting for a reaction. What he received was unexpected; Sandra released the old merc’s hands and lowered hers to his waist, where she reached around to embrace him. With his own hands still trapped between them, he carefully rotated them around in order to place his palms and fingers on her breasts; this elicited a groan of pleasure as she returned his kiss, with interest.

Breaking away to take a breath, she smiled coquettishly and whispered, “Say what you will, Zaeed … you’re a good kisser.” Glancing past his shoulder, she finished with, “I should go … It’s been a really long day; I have more weapons drills to oversee in the morning, and I have to undergo another physical in the afternoon. Here’s hoping Doctor Chakwas will release me to full duty.’

“Okay, then,” came the reply. “Thanks fer ’avin’ dinner wiv me, Sandra … I really enjoyed yer company.” Leaning in, he kissed her on the cheek before bidding her good night, then turned to stroll back the way they had come. Patton touched her cheek with her fingers as she watched him leave, wondering when … or if … she would see him again.
First Mission, Delta Ward

Persephone, grant me the foresight to know when I must let go my old life to start anew; Artemis, grant me the strength of your spine when you helped deliver Apollo, your own twin; Athena, grant me the solidarity in your sinews for which you were born in all of your armour; Aphrodite, grant me the kind of heart that always follows my passions true; Andromeda, grant me the wish to never fall out of love with the night sky or the glisten of its stars; And Hera, grant me your fury, so I can remind my enemies I am not the weakness they perceive, I am the oncoming storm … I am war! — 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’

Kaffe – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Liūyè 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.

Nángùn – [南棍] – literally, a ‘southern staff’, polished, two-meter long white wax wooden staff.

Qíngrén – [情人 – lover]

♦ INSIDE IRINGÛ-EßIZKUR, BRAVO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Buchanan was glancing around nervously as I made ready to leave him in order to begin working in the close-by data center. “I’ll just be on the other side of this bulkhead, Griff.”

He dropped his bags in his new mobile quarters before focusing on the ceiling. “I am not saying I trust you, but if Sammy says you are okay, that is something I can live with … I hope I can live with, anyway. It is just difficult for me to accept that you will not kill me in my sleep.”

›I will reiterate … I am not a monster, Buchanan-Griffen. I harbor no hidden desire to harm you‹

Iringù-Eßizkur paused for a moment before adding, ›You spoke of the angles and surfaces being ‘out of kilter’. If you dislike the interior, I can alter its appearance … just explain what you expect. It is a malleable arrangement that can be transformed with little more than a thought‹.

Griff looked at me dumbfounded before answering in a voice reflecting his amazement. “If you can do that, I would be very grateful … or I will not be able to stay in here for any length of time. Looking around in here actually induces a touch of nausea within me.” He let out a soft sigh. “All I ask is you get rid of the curved corners and shit; I need ninety-degree corners and level floors, without all the weird geometric lines on them.” I grinned as he shook his head and continued, “If you cannot erase the lines, I suppose I can cover the deck with a few rugs.”

›That should not be necessary, Buchanan-Griffen … but be advised: some of the curved corners are a result of proximity to my outer skin. Eliminating all of them would result in a significant reduction in the interior space available for habitation‹.

“ … just Griff, if you will,” Buchanan replied. “And just … do what you can, Irin … ah, sorry.”

Ears coloring slightly, he glanced at me as he continued, “I have heard Traynor refer to you as Irin
… Is it acceptable for me to call you by that name as well?”

The machine’s voice sounded a bit … amused. ›Griff. Yes, you may refer to me as ‘Irin’. if it will make your stay more comfortable. And, coverings for the decks should not be necessary, unless you simply wish to make the space more … comfortable … warmer‹

Griff looked at me once more, his expression telling me he had relaxed ever so slightly. He dismissed me with a nod, saying, “Go ahead, Sammy. I’ll get my stuff put away.”

♦ DELTA WARD, AT LARGE · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Griff and I had traveled in the speeder from Iringù-Ebízkur’s location in Bravo Ward to a small café near the Alliance docks, a safe rendezvous location I had discovered while looking through the old Shadow Broker records. Still, I decided to exercise an abundance of caution by parking the speeder a full klick away; we walked the remaining distance while employing the cloaking shield generators I had just rebuilt.

Reaching the office block, we pausing by the building’s corner; I looked around carefully; seeing no one close by, I decloaked, prompting Griff to follow my example. After leading the way inside, I ordering coffee for Griff and a pot of tea for myself before taking a seat at a corner table to wait for Xiùlán.

While we waited, Griff used his fingers, seemingly to scrub sideways across his mouth as he quietly spoke through his hand, “I’m curious, Samantha. How many people, besides Doctor T’Soni, and perhaps Commander Shepard, know about the apartment?”

I smiled at his clever way of hiding his mouth. “The only other person I know of is Xiùlán … she visited right after I was granted access. I don’t believe there’re any others aware of its existence. The asari businesses on the ground floor are aware the space is above them, but without the software needed to unlock the encrypted haptic interfaces, they cannot access it. It’s quite secure.”

Griff smiled at that. “No encryption is unbreakable, Sammy.

Smiling grimly in response, I explained, “The elevator is rigged, Griff. Should anyone successfully bypass the encrypted lock on the outer access door, the controls inside the car are programmed to recognize that hack as hostile.” After pausing for a few moments to let that sink in, I continued.

“Once the doors close, the car goes down a level. The chamber below opens out to a tunnel, which ends out past the Citadel’s kinetic barrier.”

Buchanan’s mouth fell. “Damn! That seems to be a really harsh … and lethal penalty, Sam. Any chance that could happen to me if I mess up when I enter the passcode?”

“The response is only triggered by a hostile entry. You’d have to seriously … mess up, as you say … the entry codes to provoke such a reaction.”

Griff nodded his understanding, saying, “Thanks. That makes me feel a helluva lot better … I think.”

Falling silent, he sipped his coffee as we waited … it had been only ten minutes or so, but to me it felt as if an hour had passed when the door finally opened to admit the woman for whom we had been waiting. Xiùlán smiled as she spotted us and walked up to our table, where she enveloped Griff in a heartfelt hug. “Buchanan! It’s really great to see you again!” After planting a kiss on his cheek, she looked into his eyes as she held onto his shoulders and softly said, “I never got a chance
to express my appreciation for keeping Sammy from blowing the both of you up in that warehouse … before the damned war.” With a quick glance in my direction, she hugged him again, said, “Xièxiè!” [謝謝！ – Thank You!] then released him, pulled out a chair and took a seat close to me, as I slid the case I had previously tried to give her to rest beside her booted feet.

Xiùlán was plainly in a hurry—she was nervously looking around when I asked, “So, what’s happening at the Alliance docks that has you so worried, Luv?”

Glancing around again as she shifted around slightly in her chair, she quietly replied, “There’s nothing tangible, Sà mǐ … it’s just a feeling I get … an uncomfortable itch between my shoulder blades whenever I’m outside the ship. It’s like I’m being watched, and not by anyone working on the docks. It feels as if it’s coming from outside the perimeter. I think the source is one of the buildings overlooking the yard.”

I had been Xiùlán’s companion long enough to trust her unreservedly. If she felt there were unfriendly eyes watching her—or watching the docks where the Hong Kong and Normandy were berthed—that was all the proof I needed. “Ship leaves when?”

“Day after tomorrow. We’re laying in supplies for an extended assignment … doesn’t look like we’ll return here for a number of weeks.”

“Do you still have your personal cloaking shield generator?”

“I’m wearing it … used it when I left the ship.”

I reached around behind my back, unlatched my own shield generator and held it out for Xiùlán. “Take this one, give me yours.” I quickly stilled the protest I could see forming on my lover’s lips, saying, “Take it, Qíngrén … it looks no different than Alliance standard issue, but the kinetic barrier is twenty percent stronger, and the cloak is more efficient—less chance your form can be detected by a squint hiding in the shadows.” With a grin I hoped was more modest than snarky, I added, “I managed to make it more efficient without increasing the power draw. You absolutely need this one.”

Xiùlán was closer to me than anyone, so knew that arguing with me once my mind was made up was totally futile. She unclipped her own shield generator, set it on the table and picked up the one I was giving her. Inclining her head towards the one on the table as she latched her new unit into the receptacle on her armor, she asked, “What’ll you do with that one?”

“Modify it … make it better. I try my damnedest to never throw away electronics … you know that.” I clipped Xiùlán’s old generator into the socket on my own armor, hidden under the hooded cloak I now wore whenever I was out.

Apparently noticing my custom armor under my cloak, a worried frown momentarily crossed her face as she asked, “You two aren’t going to be actively doing ops, are you?” A pair of concerned, sable-brown eyes bored accusingly into me as she continued, “Your most recent adventure nearly cost you your life, Sà mǐ.”

I reached for and took her hand. Squeezing gently, I solemnly replied, “Griff and I don’t intend to go out on any ops, Ai.” [愛 – Love]

Xiùlán appeared to be unconvinced. “Uh-huh. You forget how well I know you, Sà mǐ…” Turning her attention to Buchanan, she pointed a finger at him as she said, “I’m going to trust that you will continue to be a restraining influence on her, Griff. I don’t really believe either of you will be content to simply run ops from inside a damned Reaper, or an apartment in Bravo Ward. Just
… keep each other safe, please.” With a sigh, she picked up the case I had given her and rose to leave.

Getting to my own feet, I said, “We’re going to play it safe, Xiùlán … I promise.” I enveloped her in a tight hug; after giving … and receiving … a very passionate kiss—one that instantly ignited a warm glow in my core—I reluctantly loosened my hold on her just enough to look into her eyes as I whispered, “Keep that device a secret, darling. It may prove quite useful, particularly if you keep me informed of your whereabouts. Méi yǒu nǐ de ài wǒ de shēnghuò shì bù wánzhěng de!” [沒有你的愛我生活是不完整的 – Without your love my life is incomplete!]

Xiùlán smiled softly, in that special way that spoke volumes about her feelings for me. “You need to keep practicing your Mandarin, darling. And … Wǒ duì nǐ de ài tiānchángdìjǔ, sà màn shā!” [我對你的愛天長地久,薩曼莎 - My love for you is as enduring as the sky and the earth, Samantha!] With a nod—accompanied by another whispered “Thanks!” towards Buchanan—she waited for me to drop my hands from her waist, then turned and left the café; this prompted Griff to shake his head as he looked up at me. “What?”

“My translator only picked up ‘Samantha’ from all that, Sammy. One would think that, after all these years, our auto-translators would be able to handle Chinese.”

“Mandarin, Griff. And that particular failing of our language translators is something I hope is never fixed. It’s worked to our advantage before, and I expect it will again.” Activating my omnitool, I transferred credits for our beverages to the café’s account and said, “Come on … Let’s get back. I need to initiate a search, and you need to begin contacting field agents.”

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-ÆßIZKUR, BRAVO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Having updated every processor, workstation and server related piece of equipment left inside Iringù-Æßizkur, I began using all of it in deadly earnest; I was looking for anything, no matter how insignificant, that might point to clandestine activity in the Petra Nebula … specifically, any indications that slavers had begun operating there. Of far greater importance to me, I was concentrating significant processing power to an investigation of the Vetus System—particularly the area closest to Elysium and Grissom Academy.

It came as no surprise to discover that Major Kaidan Alenko had stopped at the colony world and stayed less than twenty hours before leaving for the academy. The surprise came when I learned a virtually nude human female, possessing a surly attitude that went hand-in-hand with her almost total tattoo coverage, had stopped on the planet and stayed for a bit longer than had Alenko. Jack … Subject Zero … by whatever name she used, she’s most likely trouble with a capitol ‘T’. Must have been on the planet to see someone, came the thought.

Looking back to Kaidan’s arrival, it was easy to surmise that Jack was ultimately traveling to Grissom as well. Studying the GPS trace left by each of them, I was able to discover they had traveled to a partially destroyed home on the outskirts of town before leaving for the station. Zeroing in on the ownership of the house led to another surprise—it had been the home of Rear Admiral Jon Grissom after his retirement in 2160.

Upon a deeper search of the records for that house, I discovered a familial connection to Kahlee Sanders, who had been instrumental in helping Commander Shepard save the remaining biotics students from capture by Cerberus during the war. I knew Kahlee had been injured during the final battles to save Earth from the Reapers, but assumed she had returned either to the academy or her previous job in Alliance R&D. It wasn’t clear from the available data if the woman had recovered or was simply laying low on Elysium. She must have been living in that house, came the thought.
I added a search parameter to the program, tasking the machine to sift through all the people traveling between Elysium and Grissom Station during the past three months.

While monitoring the Grissom Academy search, I was also searching for any indication that the docking areas reserved for Alliance corvettes and frigates here on the Citadel—specifically, dock Charlie-7, berths Zerø-3 and Zerø-4—were being monitored from outside the perimeter fencing. The numerous structures located right outside the Alliance controlled and monitored docks and ancillary buildings were high enough to allow clandestine observation of the ships docked there; I initiated a high-speed search of rental and leasing records for the previous eighteen months, in an attempt to discover if anyone with a connection—no matter how tenuous—to the four major merc gangs was now hidden behind the reflective plate glass looking down on the yard.

I knew beyond any doubt the Blue Suns had been dealt a serious financial blow when Shepard’s body had been … retrieved … from the merc group before they could sell her corpse to the Collectors. Additionally, I had been part of a three-person team that recovered a stolen asari figurine the group was attempting to sell to a rare art collector on Bekenstein; that little adventure had cost them tens of thousands of credits. My qíngrén had led a squad from the Hong Kong to liberate Miranda Lawson from Suns’ captivity on Earth, and the captain of the Normandy had embarked on an Alliance-backed crusade to eradicate their entire organization from the galaxy; these facts were more than enough to convince me the bastards would want to carefully observe both ships at all times in order to know where they were, where they might be going and what their captains and crew members were doing.

Buchanan provided a welcome break from my search when he moved away from his own terminal to speak with me. “We still have eyes and ears on Omega Station, Sammy.” When I didn’t reply, he continued with, “A salarian, name of Jipaw Zilorno.”

That name got my attention. “He’s still gathering information?”

Griff nodded once as he glanced at the view screen in front of his haptic interface. “Apparently, he has been sending data to the Shadow Broker—that would be the server at the far end of the group beside you—and is being paid from the account the previous broker set up to take care of her agents in the field.” The big man chuckled slightly, adding, “He was surprised to hear from … me. Seems that any voice-comm made through that…” he pointed to an audio modulator as he was speaking, “… makes anyone speaking through it, male or female, sound like a really big, hairy-assed, scary-mean nasty monster … not unlike the yahg T’Soni and Shepard eliminated over Hagalaz.”

“So, what did you tell him concerning the long delay since he was last contacted?”

“What you wanted—that he is to double down on gathering everything possible concerning Blue Suns operations in and around Omega Station—without alerting the station’s queen.”

♦ APARTMENT IN BRAVO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Having risen early in order to do my exercises, I was standing in the middle of the large central room in our apartment. Griff was still asleep, if the orange color of the haptic lock on his door was any sign; I hadn’t invited him to join me, as his exercise regime was based more on building and maintaining muscle, while mine was geared towards maintaining my skills in close quarters hand-to-hand fighting. Having no desire to disturb him, my efforts to remain quiet had obviously been ineffective; I could sense the difference in air pressure behind me as his door partially opened.

I turned towards the door, hiding my surprise at seeing his nearly nude form. Shit, didn’t think
he’d be so damned relaxed so soon … he looks really good, I thought, even as I realized I was displaying nearly as much bare skin. I asked, “Griff … did I wake you?” I had set the large end of my nángùn on the floor; nonchalantly hanging on the staff with both hands, I continued, “You must have heard my feet striking the floor.”

Deciding to continue on, I abruptly picked up my staff and used both hands to spin it in front of my body while inviting him to sit and watch. “Morning exercises … don’t want to lose my rhythm. Force of habit, especially since I was released from hospital. I’m still working through some pain in my hips and ribs.”

I ignored his look of amazement; I was wearing my short, midriff-baring compression top in black with matching shorts that came down to the middle of my thighs. I had completely forgotten the compression top only consisted of a single, narrow strap across my back and a pair of skinny straps over my shoulders, until he asked, “When did you have that dragon tattooed on your back, Sammy? It is … large, and … quite striking.”

Having resumed my exercises, I temporarily ignored his question as I swung my nángùn in large, sweeping movements to strike at imaginary foes and block imagined counterstrikes with swift, two-handed parries. A few of the moves involved the forceful planting of a leading foot—sometimes right, sometimes left—on the wooden floor; this thumping sound was probably what had awakened Griff. I finished my routine by making several circling leaps while twirling the wooden staff around in front of my body, its rotation marked by a distinct whirring sound as the ends cut through the air.

When I once again placed the larger end of the nángùn on the floor, I said “Thanks for the complement, Griff. I had it done during my leave in Shanghai—with Xiùlán—before the war. She has a mirror image on her back, facing left, in several shades of green and gold.” I reached over my shoulder with my left hand, there to unerringly trace the dragon’s head with a fingertip as I stepped over to the far wall. After hanging my staff on a pair of hooks, I turned back to face Griff, and continued, “It’s a unique piece of art … with the exception of Xiùlán’s, there are no others like it in the galaxy. I worked with a Chinese artist, Jiang Mingli, to create the design; the drawings and stencils were destroyed after he finished the applications.”

Pulling my Liǔyè dāo from its ornate scabbard, I held the short sword with the sharpened edge facing away from me, tip level with and between my eyes; I was staring at a point in space past Griff’s head. I brought my flattened left hand up and placed my palm and extended fingers against the flat of the blade. My abrupt movement caused Buchanan to start slightly; swinging the sword down and to the right as I dropped my left arm, I paused with my right arm extended straight out to the side, blade tip pointing to the right while I held my left arm out and slightly up in a similar fashion. Suddenly swinging the blade in front of my torso by rapidly folding my right arm at the elbow, I paused yet again, now holding the sword horizontally at shoulder level as I grasped the base of the hilt, left hand below right.

Griff backed away from me as far as he could when I began rapidly moving while sweeping the 95-centimeter long blade back and forth in front of me, mixing one-handed moves with those requiring a two-handed grip; I randomly interspersed these moves with stabbing motions, as if I was attacking—or being attacked by—a number of imaginary foes. I repeated the entire routine twice more, the thin, polished blade shrieking furiously each time it sliced through the air. I was soaked in sweat by the time I finished. Carefully returning the blade to its ornate scabbard, I listened as Griff commented, “It looks as if Xiùlán instructed you quite thoroughly, Sammy. Both of you always seemed to prefer using blades … in fact, I think you are better with knives and long blades than you are with firearms. However, I don’t recall ever seeing you use that particular blade.”
Picking up a small towel, I wiped some of the moisture from my face and neck as I replied, “Special gift from Li húa—Xiùlán’s mom. Xiùlán gave it to me right after the Spec-Ops program was shut down. We were staying in the same apartment I shared with you before we were deployed to Arcturus.” Pausing for a few moments, I looked down at the ornately decorated scabbard, the wood glowing with a soft sheen from my frequent polishing. Returning my gaze to Griff, I added in a subdued voice, “It’s quite old, but no less deadly for its age. It’s a Liūyè dāo—military sidearm for cavalry and infantry during the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties. This one weighs just a shade over a kilogram. I actually used it in anger … once … right after the Normandy was returned from the edge of the galaxy.” I fell silent again, thinking back to that day, seemingly so long ago. I continued with a soft sigh, “Relieved Javik of his damned head aboard Žiuk’Durmah, right after he sabotaged the Repository’s power core. Really surprised ‘im.”

Returning my thoughts to the present and my gaze to Griff, I said, “Anyway, I need to shower and get dressed.” With a smirk, I made an obvious point of looking the nearly nude man up and down. “You probably ought to get dressed as well, Mr Buchanan. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to impress me with all those muscles.” With a light chuckle, I headed for my bedroom as I added, “Impression made. Twenty minutes or so … then we can have breakfast, check the info feeds.”

Buchanan shook his head as the door closed behind her; he couldn’t help but marvel at how well developed the woman’s body was. Her defined abs, rippling back muscles, sculpted, muscular shoulders, arms and legs all spoke to a person, gender be damned, that had honed her body into an exquisitely chiseled, organic machine. If she really lost muscle mass while recovering in the hospital, it sure as hell does not show! That Sammy had trained unceasingly to transform her body into a nearly unstoppable combat weapon—whether utilizing martial arts with her bare hands and feet, bladed weapons, or whatever she managed to either pick up or confiscate—had never ceased to amaze him; that she was also supremely talented as an expert electronics specialist was the proverbial icing on the cake. I could not ask for a better partner, he mused while moving to his own room to clean up and get dressed.

I came out of my bedroom to find Buchanan dressed and eating breakfast at the small table in the kitchen. Walking past the bulky man to the freezer, I selected a heat’n’serve cereal dish, unwrapped it and placed it in the small oven. While it was thawing, I fixed a mug of Kaffe for myself and set it on the table. At the sight of the mug, Griff remarked, “No tea this morning?”

“I’ll have some later. Have you looked at the overnight info feeds?” Taking a couple of sips from the mug, I sighed with pleasure at the taste before setting the mug down as the oven timer chimed. After retrieving my meal, I joined Griff at the table.

Griff spoke softly as I sat down across from him. “I scanned through the headers … looks like there may be more to the rumors of pirate activity near Elysium than we initially believed; some strange looking vessels have been detected near the relay. Nothing of any note happening at the colony or at Grissom, but I am still looking.” Taking a sip of coffee, he added the news that the Hong Kong had departed in the wee hours of the morning. “I checked the security footage like you asked; ship made no sound as it backed out of the berth, and the lighting was so dim down there it was difficult to see any movement.”

“Almost as if it simply vanished.”

“Exactly! Funny thing though … within minutes of the ship’s departure, there was a tenfold increase in Blue Suns’ comms activity.” Griff smiled as he concluded, “Looks as if they have eyes
on the docks all the time. Is there anything we can do to stop them?"

“Soon as I discover which apartment … or apartments … they have operatives in, I’ll pay them an unannounced visit. I don’t expect we can persuade them to move on, and their landlords certainly ain’t gonna toss them out as long as they’re receiving rent payments every month, so stopping them permanently may prove to be our only option.”

Buchanan chortled as he observed, “Somehow, your intentions are not surprising, Sammy. Xiùlán was hoping you would not be doing ground ops again; you are going to anyway, are you not?”

I smiled grimly as I replied, “May not have the luxury of choice in the matter, Griff.” With a heavy sigh, I finished my cereal, then rose and deposited the empty container in the recycler. “The Blue Suns cannot be allowed to do anything that would place my inamorata or any of her crew … or the crew of the Normandy … in peril. It hasn’t even been a full year since all the people of the galaxy managed to eliminate a recurring threat to our very existence … having accomplished that, don’t you think people deserve to live their lives free from being continuously preyed upon by the mercenary bastards?”

When Buchanan didn’t respond, I refilled my mug with the rest of the Kaffe I’d brewed and silently walked out to our lounge area. The room now held a bit more furniture than when Griff had first visited; there was a long console along one wall, with several comfortable chairs available for use by either partner. There was also a floor-to-ceiling panel, painted a hideous shade of flat green, placed three meters away from the equipment-laden console; its vertical edges were curved towards the equipment, and it was centered in front of the camera where outgoing transmissions originated.

Part of the equipment I had set up would electronically remove the green backdrop and superimpose a photo montage of Liara’s old quarters, which I had recorded in the Normandy many months ago; the image received by anyone with whom either Griff or myself was speaking would appear to be originating from within the Broker’s previous office. I had also set up a pair of spotlights that would backlight my hooded form, keeping my face in deep shadow.

I had copied this setup from that which was inside Iringù-Eßizkur; Griff had already employed it for speaking with several of the agents scattered across the galaxy. After reviewing a couple of the vid-records of Griff’s conversations, I was satisfied that anyone viewing either of them would be convinced the person speaking was the genuine article, and not someone to be trifled with.

I settled into a chair facing the monitor currently scrolling the overnight reports, bottom-to-top, on the display. After entering a few characters into the haptic keyboard, I tasked the machine—actually installed within Iringù-Eßizkur—with performing a more detailed and methodical search of relay records for traffic entering the Vetus System during the previous forty-five days. There had been no evidence of slavers entering the nebula, but there were a few reports of strange vessels being sighted in the area closest to Elysium.

I tasked a second machine with investigating activity in the Terminus Systems, with Omega Station and the Valhallan Threshold the primary focus of my research. After Zaeed Massani had followed Blue Suns second-in-command Solem Dal’Serah to Susskind Station in the empty, binary star system of Raheel-Leyya, I had gradually become more interested in what seemed to be an increasingly important secondary base of operations for the merc gang. Sensing that Captain Bill Cody would need every advantage if he was going to tackle them in their own territory, I wanted to have a head-start on the information requests I was sure would be coming, from the Alliance and from Zaeed Massani.

In the meantime, I composed a brief message to Xiùlán, outlining the reports of strange vessel
sightings near Elysium. Loading the message into my secure communicator, I sent it off with a ‘message opened’ request. With any luck, I would have a response in twelve hours or less.

♦ LUXURY APARTMENTS AT THE ALLIANCE DOCKS, DELTA WARD ♦

Casually strolling past the various shops and stores adjacent to a rather busy travel lane, I was surreptitiously studying several buildings that were home to a number of exclusive apartments on the other side of the boulevard. My curiosity concerning these luxury abodes had developed immediately upon learning of a massive increase in galaxy-wide communications among members of the Blue Suns, following the departure of the SSV Hong Kong in the early morning hours of the previous day. Coincidence? I thought. Not bloody fuckin’ likely. The docks … the Normandy and Hong Kong … must be under their observation.

After listening to Xiùlán’s description of her uneasiness—her feelings of being watched anytime she left the ship—I had done some deep research into the tenant records of the apartments overlooking the berths of the Hong Kong and Normandy. The increased comms reactions to the Hong Kong’s departure was all the confirmation I needed that members of the Blue Suns were actively observing those two frigates, as well as the movements of the officers and crew around both vessels. After uncovering the identities of those leasing the apartments, I had used all the tools at my disposal to uncover the details of their lives, with an emphasis on employment history and political affiliations.

Of no great surprise, the employment histories of the two people I was most interested in—a turian and a batarian—had been carefully manufactured to appear normal … if arriving on the Citadel with an employment record uninterrupted by the Reaper War could be considered normal.

Salo Rac’Maroh’s previous position was listed as a machinist on a batarian light cruiser, prior to the Reaper’s destruction of virtually everything and everyone in the Kite’s Nest, including their warships; it seemed odd to me that Rac’Maroh had been fortunate enough to survive the decimation of the Hegemony’s naval fleet, including the destruction of the BRV Stygian Star, the cruiser on which he had supposedly been posted.

Displaced turian Arius Varangian had somehow managed to survive the Reaper’s decimation of the spaceport serving Sarlik’s southwestern neighborhood; records showed he had been a cargo handler/loader at Varidos Frontier Shipping. The company had actually existed, at least until the ground on which it stood—along with everything within three square klicks of their docks—had been vaporized by some of the first Reapers to arrive in orbit. If Varangian had been employed at Varidos, I was unable to uncover a shred of any corroborating evidence.

I was having a difficult time believing that a turian and a batarian—neither of whom had been employed since reaching the Citadel—could afford to live in an abandoned shipping crate, much less the high four-figure-a-month sum needed to pay the cost of leasing any of the luxury apartments near the Alliance docks. I needed to get inside those buildings … actually see them, as there were no pictures on file to go along with their fictional employment histories. Once I had them visually identified, I’d work out a plan to get them evicted from their pricy abodes.

A germ of an idea was already forming in my mind as I paused to gaze at the luxury furnishings on display behind the heavy plate ‘glass’ of the store in front of which I had paused. I need in those apartments so I can confirm the type of surveillance equipment being used. I really didn’t believe the turian or the batarian would be sitting in a chair placed in front of a tinted window, watching the docks all day every day … they would have wide-field vid-cams and audio-amplifiers aimed at the docked vessels. Hell, Varangian and Rac’Maroh don’t even need to be physically in the
apartments except to upload their records to their bosses.

After a short walk, I jogged through a pedestrian tunnel to the other side of the travel lane filled nearly wall-to-wall with speeder traffic.

♦ APARTMENT 506B · DELTA WARD ♦

Having alerted Griff of my intention to get a look inside one of the apartments, I asked him to pull up the building specs and send them to my omnitool so I’d have a clear picture in my mind of the layout before I went in.

“I thought you were going to refrain from doing ground ops, Sammy,” came the accusation.

My reply sounded a touch snarky, even to me. “This is just a simple reconnaissance mission, Griff. I need to see what equipment these guys are using in order to develop effective countermeasures. Iringū-Ébizkur can float past the docks while she scans the place for organic occupants; soon as I know there’s nobody home, I get in, take a look and get out. Simple.”

Buchanan tersely replied, “Maybe in your world, Sammy, but standby … we are on the move.”

As Griff was still familiarizing himself with the equipment inside the Repository, it took slightly longer for him to provide the data I was looking for. As he sent the building schematics to my omnitool, he said, “We just slid by overhead, Sammy. Iringū-Ébizkur’s scans confirm the turian is not in his apartment … that’s number 506B.” After a brief pause, he added, “A batarian is in Salo Rac’Maroh’s apartment—number 404—but that’s located in the adjacent building, so you should be clear. Do you need me watching your six?”

After thinking about it for a few moments, I decided I didn’t want both of us on the ground at the same time. “Iringū-Ébizkur can monitor me and my surroundings from overhead, Griff. She can orbit above the ward at a fair altitude and still ‘see’ me. There’s so many Repositories around the Citadel these days nobody pays much attention to ‘em anymore.”

Buchanan sighed, “Be careful, Sammy … please? Do not take any chances in there.”

Energizing the cloak of my combat shield generator, I responded with, “Stay on the comms, Big Guy. I’ll be in and out before you know it.”

As exclusive as the apartments in this building were supposed to be, I fully expected that breaching the Haptic locks for the main access doors to the building’s lobby would present a much bigger challenge. I was thrilled to discover the codes needed for entry were quite simple, compared with what I’d needed to do in order to enter the Blue Suns headquarters to get to Solem Dal’Serah. The elevators themselves did not even have passcode requirements, and the cameras monitoring the lobby, passageways and the elevator doors were not capable of recording my passage, thanks to my cloaking generator.

Before boarding the elevator for the ride up to level five, I leaned against the wall next to the door; bending over my omnitool to hide its deep purple glow, I sent a command to all the cameras monitoring the lobby, passageways, stairwells and elevators to cease recording. I then instructed the security VI to loop the past hour of previously recorded video back into the save files while continuing to increment the time display; this would keep anyone from being able to pinpoint when the elevator was accessed and the door to 506B was unlocked and opened.

After riding an elevator to the top floor, I pressed the HOLD button to lock it out on this level as I
called Buchanan. “I’m on level five, Griff … anything I should be aware of?”

“There has been no movement, Sammy. Middle of the day, most of those tenants are at work.”

Leaving the elevator behind, I cautiously moved towards Varangian’s apartment, grinning at Buchanan’s remark. I found it hard to believe that anyone living in this building had ever done an honest days’ work in their lives. Reaching 506B, I crouched in front of the Haptic interface and used my omnitool to probe its intricacies. Surprisingly, the codes were in no way complicated … I had the door unlocked in less than twelve seconds.

As I was starting to push it open, Buchanan shouted a warning. “Traynor! Stop!” Griff’s voice was urgent in my comms. “Unlocking that door caused a VI inside to go active,” he hissed. “Iringù-Eßizkur believes it is weaponized and programmed to target movement at that door.”

Breathing a silent prayer of thanks for having Iringù-Eßizkur and Griff on overwatch, I asked, “Can she disable it remotely?”

“Not possible at this distance, Sammy. We’re working on acquiring the code that will allow you to do so. Standby.” Buchanan’s voice sounded stressed … it had been a long time since he had done a clandestine job.

“Iringù-Eßizkur … Any sign of movement up from below?”

›I can detect no other organics moving in your direction at this time, Shadow Broker‹.

Buchanan’s voice came back on the comm circuit. “I found a code for you, Sammy. Transmitting it now.” As my omnitool lit up in response to the alpha-numeric text Griff had sent, he added, “As to the lack of people in the building, I finally discovered why … it is solely owned by Blue Suns Development, as is the building next to it. That explains how Varangian and Rac’Maroh can afford to stay in these places … they are not required to pay rent! They may not even be permanent residents … their leaders probably rotate new bodies in there on a regular basis.”

“Good to know … means taking either one or both of these mercs down won’t solve the problem of the Suns observing everything on the docks. Dammit to hell, Griff. We need to come up with a permanent solution … I’ll not have the bastards constantly monitoring the Hong Kong and Normandy, nor can I allow them the luxury of continuing to watch the comings and goings of their officers and crew.”

Going silent as I remotely logged into the computer controlling all the security VI’s in the building, I entered the code to disable only the one behind this door. Utilizing the pivot-side of the door frame to shield myself against weapons fire, I shoved hard on the door and quickly withdrew my arm; it swung open, banging to a rebounding stop against a plushly upholstered arm chair. Taking a deep breath, I rapidly leaned my head and upper torso in and back out of the open doorway; the quick look confirmed the VI was inactive, an extremely rare Geth Pulse Rifle pointed up and to the side.

Thinking, Where in ‘ell did that thing come from? I cautiously entered the large room. After gently closing and relocking the door, I hugged the walls and circled around to a position behind the deactivated VI. Activating my omnitool, I recorded the view of the docks from the several large, tinted windows, including the docked Normandy and the empty berth where the Hong Kong had been, along with the several vid-cams and high-gain audio eavesdroppers trained on the area below. I was inspecting the equipment being used to transmit the saved files to Blue Suns leadership when the unexpected sound of Griff’s voice in my ear startled me enough that I had to ask him to repeat.
“I said, a turian just entered the building. He is attempting to access the elevator you locked out.”

“Shit! Okay, I’ll take care of it.” I quickly left the apartment and trotted down the passage to the elevator, reactivating my cloaking generator as I ran. Reaching into the car, I released the hold placed on it. As the doors swished closed, I dashed back to the apartment, there to close and latch the door from outside. Next, I jogged back along the passageway, there to pause a few meters on the far side of the elevator, where I leaned against the wall. Opening my omnitool, I re-enabled the cameras monitoring the passageway. While I had my omnitool activated, I added several lines of code to the guard VI’s program instructions before reinitiating its standby mode. Changing my omnitool to its combat profile, I went to one knee and waited.

In less than thirty seconds, the elevator doors silently parted to reveal a turian I believed to be Arius Varangian; he turned away from my position to saunter down the passageway, where he paused in front of the door I had just closed and latched. Activating the omnitool on his left wrist, he entered a code to release the lock. As soon as the Haptic device transitioned from red to green, he casually pushed the door open, entered the apartment, then closed and relocked it behind him.

Standing, I huffed and said, “Dammit, Griff. Sonovabitch nearly had me in there.” Moving to the nearby staircase, I disabled the building’s cameras once more, opened the heavy fire-door and started down. “I’m heading over to Irin’s location, Griff.”

I was nearly to the main floor before Griff responded softly with a question. “Think we can we shut them down electronically?”

A wry chuckle preceded my response. “I don’t think we’ll need to … The Blue Suns own those buildings … at least two of their foot soldiers are living there, with who knows how many other members in residence.” Upon leaving the enclosed staircase and crossing the lobby, I re-enabled the rest of the cameras as soon as I was standing outside. Walking into a shadowed area, I ensured the deep cowl of my grey cloak was well over my head before disengaging my cloaking generator.

“The Alliance has declared them a terrorist organization, Griff; for a price, I’ll make a deal to send them all my research on those two buildings, along with evidence of the clandestine electronic monitoring they’re doing. Alliance anti-terrorism group will shut the bastards down, possibly place a permanent prohibition on leasing the top floors to anyone.”

Griff wanted to know, “What about the floors below?”

“Ships and docks cannot be adequately observed from those floors … windows are not high enough.” In only a few minutes, I had reached my speeder. “Has Iringù-Ebizkur touched down in her parking position?”

“Her feet are on the ground, Sammy, and I am more than ready to head back to our apartment … you ready to have some dinner with me?”

Smiling as I powered up the X3M, I responded with, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.” Thinking, Hmm … he said our apartment. Guess he really is going to stay with me.
What Price Element Zero?

When action grows unprofitable, gather information; when information grows unprofitable, sleep.
— Ursula K. Le Guin, The Left Hand of Darkness

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/Source: CDN)

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-EßIZKUR · BRAVO WARD, CITADEL · WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Admiral Steven Hackett attempted, without much success, to school his expression of dismay at the information with which he’d just been presented by an agent for the Shadow Broker. Sipping hot coffee from his mug, he studied the image looking at him from the QEC display pad as he asked, “Are you sure this information is accurate?”

Buchanan chuckled, knowing the vocal modulator was rendering his speech into something dark and ominous sounding by disguising his voice, adding a flanging quality while making it sound every bit as deep and bassy as it did for Traynor’s voice – listening to test recordings of Traynor’s modified voice compared to his own revealed no detectable difference; additionally, his face was completely masked in deep shadows cast by bright backlighting and an oversized hood made of a darkly dyed artificial leather. “Admiral Hackett. Realize that the Shadow Broker does not sell erroneous information. To ever do such would call into question every single bit of data gathered and disseminated to each of our many clients … galaxy-wide.” Griff paused a moment to allow his declaration to register; pressing on, he said, “There are apartments—owned by an organization the Systems Alliance has declared to be a terrorist enterprise—sitting just beyond and above the docks assigned to Normandy and Hong Kong. Martial Law is still in effect, Admiral. I cannot believe you need to be reminded that the Blue Suns can be prohibited from allowing anyone to reside in the top floors of those buildings.”

Hackett replied, “It doesn’t seem fair to simply toss people out in the streets.”

Griff lowered his voice slightly. saying “The only tenants of any of those exclusive, top-floor apartments are Arius Varangian and Salo Rac’Maroh; both are longtime members of the Blue Suns, Admiral. You would be doing the crews of both frigates an enormous favor by declaring those apartments off limits … unless the Suns would care to have Alliance crew members domiciled there … rent-free.” Griff chuckled before continuing. “Currently, the arrival or departure of either ship causes an immediate uptick in communications among the mercs, on this station and galaxy-wide, as they file position reports while the ships transit the relays. Their destinations are known … and monitored … before they can even arrive.”

Hackett sighed. “I see your point. I will direct our security teams to have access to those floors vacated and sealed. I am grateful for your diligence in reporting this to me. Thank you.”

♦ OMEGA STATION, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM · OMEGA NEBULA ♦

Aria T’Loak stretched languorously. She was preparing to leave her comfortable bed—along with the fabulous maiden with whom she had spent the previous evening —in order to shower and dress for the day, then slip into Afterlife for breakfast. She took a close look at the sleeping face beside
her and sighed as she brushed her lips across the purple-tinged top crests. *This one is a skilled lover ... physically, at least. Her mental abilities need honing, but that will come with practice ... which I am only too happy to provide.* Placing a final kiss on the young asari’s forehead, Aria slid out from under the sheets to silently pad into her lavish bathroom.

In less than forty minutes, the Pirate Queen had left her private chambers and was enjoying a steaming mug of tea along with a hearty breakfast, the food chosen specifically to replace calories and eezo expended during the intense physical romps she had enjoyed the previous evening.

Having cleaned her plate, Aria was enjoying her second mug of tea as she looked through the station’s financial reports for the previous day, week and month. She had just taken a sip from her mug when two credit amounts on the page caught her undivided attention, causing her to nearly choke on the hot liquid. After a small coughing fit to clear her trachea of the misplaced beverage, she forced herself to remain calm—outwardly, at least—as she took another sip of tea, swallowed the mouthful of warm liquid and carefully placed the mug on the table. Glancing up at her two nearby bodyguards, she said, “Bray?” in a questioning tone.

Her unofficial second-in-command immediately approached Aria’s table; crossing his arms over his chest, he tipped his head to the left for a moment as he responded, “Aria?”

The asari leaned back in her high-backed chair as she placed the ankle of her left leg atop her right knee; glaring at Bray through narrowed eyes, she commanded in a low voice, “You need to discover what in Goddess name has caused the bottom to fall out of the price of eezo – processed, and raw ore.”

Bray always did his best to satisfy Aria’s orders, but felt he needed clarification in this instance. “May I presume to have your permission to do whatever is needed to obtain results for you?”

Looking up at him from under her scowl, she coldly replied, “I need this done yesterday, Bray.”

The batarian immediately spun on his heel and left. He had seen that look from Aria before … Any recipient of *that* particular gaze needed to produce results … fast.

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**SHADOW BROKER’S APARTMENT, BRAVO WARD · CITADEL**

Apprehension was the first reaction I experienced, just before responding to the incoming Comms call; it was the first one I had received from a reactivated agent. Buchanan was still tracking down and enlisting the aid of as many former agents as he could reach; this call was from the first agent he had successfully contacted … the salarian Jipaw Zilorno, on Omega Station.

Touching the ACCEPT control on the receiver, I gave what I believed to be the Shadow Broker’s standard response in one word. “Report.”

The salarian was plainly nervous. It had been many months since he had needed to personally speak with the Shadow Broker. Thinking back to a time not so long ago, before the Reaper invasion—before Liara and Rachaél had killed the yahg that was the Broker at the time—I remembered paying a personal visit to the Broker’s salarian agent on Omega Station. I had been searching for an exceedingly rare asari figurine, stolen by pirates and sold to the Blue Suns. Thinking about this, I was only half-listening to the salarian’s report; I would replay and listen to the full recording after he was done.

Before signing off, I ordered Zilorno to continue gathering details concerning Aria T’Loak’s sudden interest in the price of Element Zero. After carefully listening to his report once again, I
placed the saved recording in a newly created file on the server; I recalled that, after being forced to eject Žiuk’Durmah’s core before Javik’s rogue code could destroy him, I had requested that Harbinger begin recovering the refined eezo spilled from the broken cores of disabled warships and Reapers alike. I expected that portion of the recovery was still ongoing above Earth and in the skies of every other planet that had seen ship-to-ship combat; besides Earth, the greatest numbers of destroyed ships and dead Reapers were in orbit about Palaven, with a lesser number above Tuchanka, Thessia, and the industrialized colony worlds.

I had never expected the recovered material to be marketed; Zilorno’s report of crashing prices seemed to indicate a substantial amount of the element must have found its way into the legitimate markets. Someone—or a number of someones—was making a shit-load of credits, selling fraudulently obtained or stolen eezo primarily through energy traders and brokers on Illium; the results of a suddenly abundant supply of processed eezo—available for only the cost of shipping it—was depressing legitimate wholesale and retail prices.

I could just imagine how this would affect Omega’s Pirate Queen. Aria had her blue fingers in every illegal activity on the station; nothing happened on her station that was too unimportant to garner her attention. Unfortunately, the legitimate sale of Omega Station’s refined eezo was the prime mover of the station’s entire economy. Additionally, the prices for raw, unprocessed ore recovered from the asteroid’s interior had collapsed, as no one wished to pay the queen’s asking price when the cost of processing it now exceeded the amount that could be earned from its sale.

The prospect of a galaxy-wide eezo trade war prompted me to set a third server to work. I also needed to compile a list of any non-Repository organizations recovering the processed stuff spilled during combat. After initiating the search program, I placed an urgent, secure call to the Normandy. As the Shadow Broker, it would be my first official conversation with an Alliance representative.

In only a few moments, Yeoman Coleen Pruitt’s image materialized above the miniaturized display platform adjacent to my work station. "This is Yeoman Pruitt of the SSV Normandy. To whom am I speaking, please?"

Speaking slowly—and enunciating each word carefully—I replied, “This is the Shadow Broker. I have important information for your captain.” Trusting that the shadowlike image of my face was being rendered unrecognizable by the hooded cloak and severe backlighting, along with the vocal modulator rendering the sound … the timbre … of my voice as deeply powerful and evil as the Broker’s voice had always sounded, I waited to see how Pruitt would respond.

Despite looking nervous, she had the audacity to ask, “May I relay the subject of this call to him?”

“You may not!” I thundered in reply. As much as I had liked Coleen when still on the ship, I intended to establish right up front that the Broker was not to be questioned by a lowly non-com. “You are wasting my valuable time, Yeoman, not to mention the credits I am billing the Alliance!”

I watched in silent amusement as Coleen’s face blanched at the harshness of the Broker’s response to her question. With a meek, “Right away, Sir,” her image disappeared as she hurriedly left to personally track down Bill Cody, leaving me to wait while trying to arrest a chuckle at being called, ‘Sir’. The vocal modulator really does make a difference!

When Cody’s image appeared after several minutes, the irritated expression on his face was more than worth my wait. “I don’t give a damn how important …”

I was more than ready for him and pounced, shouting, “Silence! Do not presume to address the Shadow Broker as if he was some fucking bilge rat on the Normandy’s crew, Captain Cody! I did
not contact your ship to bandy words about with one of your subordinates; my time is much too valuable to waste standing by while you are tracked down in order for me to speak with you!” I had to bite my lip to keep from snickering at Cody’s increasing expression of disbelief … and anger … at the way I was dressing him down. “You may rest assured the Alliance will be billed for the additional time I was required to spend staring at an empty screen.”

“Shadow Broker you may now be, but I have not forgotten your true identity,” came the terse response. “I don’t answer to you, no matter how important you think you may be.”

Of course you haven’t forgotten, came the thought as I replied in a lower, deadlier tone of voice. “Then you would be wise to also remember that, should I so desire, I can have your miserable existence terminated with little more than a thought, and you would never see it coming.” Pausing to wait for a rejoinder to that little bon mot, I continued when none was forthcoming. “I have valuable information for you, but I think now that I should sell it to an organization that will display more … gratitude … and provide me with more credits. Eclipse? The Blue Suns, perhaps?”

It was easy for me to see Cody’s expression harden further as his face took on a reddish hue. “My apologies, Shadow Broker …” he ground out, his jaw clenched in barely controlled anger. “By all means, please tell me what you have.”

Grinning inwardly at his emphasis on my new title, I declared, “Aria T’Loak has become extremely interested in the price of Element Zero; the retail price is falling at an accelerating rate. The Reapers have been retrieving and storing loose eezo from orbit about Earth, Palaven and other planets; additionally, they are salvaging the eezo cores from derelict Reapers, many of which are in failing orbits, thus in imminent danger of falling into the atmosphere and crashing to the surface of the planets over which they now orbit.”

Cody had calmed down slightly as he listened to me. “I do not see how any of this is a problem in which I should involve myself or this ship.”

“Quite simply, Captain, the recovered material was never intended to be sold. There is a very large amount currently sited near the Citadel. Refined eezo, such as has been recovered, has suddenly become available for sale on the commodities market, primarily on Illium.” I paused for a moment to glance at the now flashing search terminal, which had results I needed to study.

Continuing in an even voice, I said, “These sales can only be possible if the material has been looted from the recovered stockpile in the Widow System, or alternatively, if it has been stolen or illegally recovered from planetary orbit. The source matters not. The instability created in the legitimate markets does matter. Omega Station in the Sahrabarik System has historically been the primary source for refined eezo used in starship mass effect drives.”

Cody took the opportunity to jump in when I paused. “Is there a point to all of this … Broker?”

With a small chuckle I replied, “Your impatience is appreciated, Captain Cody. The point is this: Aria T’Loak has noticed the precipitous decline in the revenue she receives for the sale of refined eezo, and she is currently unable to sell the unprocessed ore … at any price. She does possess numerous warships, left behind when Commander Shepard assisted her in removing Cerberus forces from the station … what you need to understand is that she will not hesitate to employ said warships against civilian targets in defense of the suddenly non-exclusive market for her product.”

Cody’s next question was tinged with amazement. “She would target citizens allied with the Alliance over this? What the hell is she thinking?”
“She believes the standard of living enjoyed by the citizens of Omega Station is being negatively affected by this development, Captain. Understand … Aria T’Loak believes Omega’s domination of the galactic trade in eezo is under attack, just as surely as if a fleet of warships was firing on the station. The further the price falls—particularly because the material being offered for sale is low-cost or no-cost salvage—the more inclined she will be to lash out at those sellers.”

“Are you suggesting the Alliance needs to use force to keep Omega’s queen in check?”

I chuckled mirthlessly, knowing the modulator would transform the sound of my laughter into something exceedingly sinister. “I am suggesting no such thing, Captain. Instead of open conflict, this problem can more easily be resolved by persuading Aria to lend physical support to the recovery efforts. Many of the destroyed Reaper constructs and Allied warships are in unstable orbits about the planets over which they were fighting; most are in imminent danger of falling from orbit. Atmospheric friction would cause the structural break-up of already damaged vessels, thus exposing their cores and spreading eezo particles and dust across a wide swath of land and water below.”

I intensified my voice to get my point across. “The smaller constructs destroyed on the ground are themselves an environmental disaster, just waiting for people ignorant of proper handling methods to unleash massive amounts of eezo across the landscape; what will become of people beneath the reentry paths of a large number of massive constructs and warships disintegrating as a result of an uncontrolled reentry into each planet’s atmosphere?”

The full realization of the Shadow Broker’s assessment caused Cody’s expression to grow solemn as he softly replied. “A lot of people would contract cancerous tumors. It would be an ecological disaster on an unprecedented scale … on Earth … on Palaven … hell, all of the council affiliated worlds and colonies, just as they are beginning to actually recover from the effects of the war.”

“It is good to know you have gained an understanding of the seriousness of these circumstances, Captain,” I replied. “I believe there are a sufficient number of Reapers to effectively monitor the situation. As declared by the Citadel Council and the Systems Alliance, Martial Law is still in effect; it would not be out of line for the Alliance to confiscate any vessel and detain their crews if they are caught in the unauthorized recovery of eezo. Those found to be stealing eezo for a quick sale should be imprisoned and their vessels impounded for auction.”

“That’s just a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“Deal with those problems however you see fit, Captain, but know this: making an example of two or three of those caught stealing would send a powerful message to any others thinking of continuing their own thefts. The Systems Alliance absolutely cannot afford to be seen as a cowardly or indecisive pushover in this matter. Send the message, and convince the asari, salarians and turians to follow your lead.”

Terminating the connection before Cody could respond, I knew the Alliance would never allow a captain to simply destroy a private, unaffiliated vessel, merely because it might be in the business of stealing or illegally retrieving eezo. I sometimes think having the batarian run the Alliance’s enforcement division would be better for everyone, came the thought as I played back the conversation. Cody will not be able to do as I suggested without getting approval from Admiral Hackett, who appears to have misplaced his balls … It will be interesting to see what develops.

I studied the results of my search for the organizations recovering processed eezo; as expected, the list was quite short. Of some surprise however, one group that seemed to be profiting from the sale of illegally obtained eezo, while based on Illium, had a substantial presence on Omega Station; I needed to get this information to the Queen. Activating my omnitool, I contacted Buchanan, who
had been staying inside Iringû-Eßizkur while working to locate agents. As soon as he answered, I said, “I need you to contact Jipaw Zilorno on Omega Station.”

♦ OMEGA STATION, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM · OMEGA NEBULA ♦

It had been only two days since Aria had tasked Bray with learning the cause of the precipitous decline in the retail price of refined eezo; he had been summoned to her private residence below the promenade in front of her nightclub, Afterlife. The batarian bodyguard and enforcer wasn’t happy, as the news he had for her was less than golden.

Standing in front of Omega’s queen, he crossed his arms over his chest and set the majority of his weight back on his left leg. “There are several reasons for the decline in eezo prices, Aria; the primary reason being the recovery of material spilled from the mass effect cores of destroyed warships belonging to the Earth Alliance and Turian Hierarchy. There is also the material being recovered from the destroyed Reapers above Earth, Palaven and other worlds.”

“They’re selling it?” Aria scowled in disbelief. “What the fuck are they thinking?”

“Officially, it’s being stored; the Alliance has not placed any of it on the market, nor do they intend to do so.” Bray referred briefly to a datapad, before handing it to his boss. “The recovered eezo is earmarked for the replacement ships currently beginning construction at Arcturus. Unfortunately, there are numerous third parties at work out there. Some are illegally retrieving material from those same sources—there are many hundreds of destroyed vessels in orbit around a number of planets, and the remnants of the Alliance and Turian Navies are stretched too thin to adequately guard everything from being clandestinely plundered.”

“You said material was being stored? And remnants, Bray?”

“The Reaper War took a tremendous toll on Alliance warships, Aria. The Second Fleet was completely destroyed at Arcturus and the Fourth Fleet was totally destroyed over Earth. As for the eezo being stored, it’s parked out of the shipping lanes … the majority of it is stored near the Widow relay. It’s a huge amount—probably enough to power several mass relays, with the stockpile growing larger by the day—recovered by the big Reapers from the shattered hulls of their own brethren. Bits from that horde are being stolen as well,” he replied. “There is no organized intent to force the prices down, Aria. It’s simple profiteering, being carried out by a small number of unscrupulous individuals … and a couple of merc gangs.”

Aria frowned as she studied the data on Bray’s device. “Eclipse? Right here on Omega? Right under my fucking nose?” Her violet eyes, darkening in barely contained anger, bored into Bray like a pair of lasers. “They wouldn’t dare!”

Bray chuckled, causing Aria’s scowling frown to deepen. “Oh, but they would, Aria. They were not high on my list of suspects until I spoke with the Shadow Broker’s agent here on the station.”

“Wait! The Shadow Broker is involved now? What the fuck, Bray? Has the entire galaxy gone stark raving mad?”

The batarian was quick to reply. “Mad, Aria? No. But you told me to do what was needed, so I reached out to some old contacts … from before the Reaper War. This agent has been on Omega since before Sovereign. He told me the Broker was already gathering information on these illegal eezo sales and offered to sell me the data at a discount.” Bray paused for a moment, then added, “I did some more nosing around, and the intel I purchased is solid. Eclipse is stealing and moving large quantities of eezo.”
Aria was not convinced. “Eclipse? I thought they were all wiped out during the war. I know they still have a presence here on the station, but it’s quite disorganized … they don’t even have a leader. Archangel managed to put a high-velocity AP round through Jaroth’s head shortly before disappearing, and Jona Sederis was killed when the Reapers moved the Citadel to Earth.”

Bray responded with a snort of derision, saying, “Sederis seemingly escaped from lockup, apparently amidst all the confusion during the Citadel’s relocation to Earth by the Reapers … a body was never found. I’m still attempting to confirm the rumor that she has taken up residence on Illium, probably in Nos Aedelos. The Eclipse was very much involved with the trade in mechs, and Nos Aedelos is the base of Hahne-Kedar’s planetary operations there.”

Aria leaned back, thinking about everything she’d just learned. When she finally spoke again, she quietly asked, “Do you have any suggestions for me, Bray? There has to be some means of dealing with this problem before the market goes completely down the shitter.”

Aria’s attitude had changed drastically—and for the better, in Bray’s view—ever since Commander Shepard had assisted her in kicking Cerberus off the station during the latter stages of the Reaper War. Still, the batarian replied to her question in a cautious tone of voice. “You possess a small fleet of very capable frigates and destroyers, along with a number of F-61’s, courtesy of the Illusive Man and Cerberus. Reach out to Spectre Shepard, Aria … offer your assistance. I can think of no one with a greater stake in seeing this problem resolved, and I expect the Alliance would welcome your participation.”

Aria chortled at the mental image brought about by Bray’s words. “Rumor has it Shepard is alive and living the good life on Thessia with her prim and proper archeologist bride. I’ve even heard she’s planning to resign her commission in the Alliance … retire from their Navy in order to accompany Liara on expeditions to those moldy old Prothean sites she loves traipsing around in.”

“Would you like me to make an attempt at contacting her?”

Aria thought about Bray’s question for several moments before replying, “Do it, quietly and quickly. This situation is costing Omega a fortune. We need to stop the hemorrhaging, fast.”

♦ T’SONI ESTATE, THESSIA · PARNITHA SYSTEM, ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Rachaël Shepard was sitting in front of one of several terminals in the secure communications room near the suite she shared with her siame. After downloading and glancing through the messages addressed to her, she started to shut down and secure the terminal when it trilled a warning that a high-priority request for a live communication was being received. Looking at the identity of the sender nearly caused her to reject it out of hand … the last person in the galaxy she wished to speak with was Aria T’Loak.

After mulling it over for a few moments, she heaved a resigned sigh and touched the ACCEPT control on the haptic interface. Of great surprise, the image that resolved itself in front of her was not Aria, but Bray, her batarian bodyguard, who greeted her in a quiet voice. “Commander Shepard. It has been some time since we have spoken. May I inquire as to the state of your health?”

Rachaël actually smiled in return. “Bray. I’m well, and I’m glad to see you survived the war. Oh, and it’s ‘Captain’ now. What can I do for you?”

“Aria asked me to contact you … and Lady T’Soni. She wishes to provide assistance to the Alliance—in the form of warships and fighter craft—to eliminate the illegal recovery and sale of
Element Zero that is threatening to collapse prices galaxy-wide.”

Shepard was intrigued. “Couldn’t she … or you, contact the Alliance direct? Why involve me?”

Bray chuckled as he tilted his head slightly to the left. “She trusts you, Shepard … as much as she trusts anyone not directly under her thumb. She realizes you may be leaving the Alliance, but also knows you remain a Spectre, so would rather deal with you and T’Soni than some mid-level bureaucrat in the Systems Alliance Military.”

“While I truly appreciate her vote of confidence, I’m really not sure what she expects me to do. I can contact Admiral Hackett, ask him to look into the matter.”

Bray continued to smile, saying, “Aria knows you have a great deal of influence with Alliance top brass, Spectre. This problem exists on a regional basis … so far. But make no mistake, Shepard. If something isn’t done … and soon … to get this situation under control, there will be more trouble in the Sahrabarik System than there ever was when Cerberus controlled Omega.” Bray finished with, “We’ll be waiting to hear back from you, Spectre,” and severed the connection.

♦ SHADOW BROKER’S APARTMENT, BRAVO WARD · CITADEL ♦

I was enjoying my second mug of Kaffe after having breakfast; Buchanan was sitting at the table to my left, sipping coffee from his mug. He appeared lost in thought, to the point I nudged his knee with my own and said, “What’s up, Griff? You’re awfully quiet this morning.”

Greenish-grey eyes flicked to the right. He must have noticed the concern in my expression; setting the mug gently on the table, he sighed heavily as he replied, “Just thinking about where we have been, you and me.”

I compressed my lips in a straight line, with the exception of the corners, which I could not keep from turning up ever so slightly. “Any place in particular?”

“Humph … Cartagena Station.” He grimaced as he said the name of the place.

My own mouth fell open in surprise. “Are you havin’ a laugh? Why ever would you be thinking about that hell hole?”

“You will probably think me crazy, Sammy.” He waited for a rejoinder—when I continued to silently study his face, he quietly said, “I was just … reminiscing, trying to picture in my mind how you single-handedly managed to get Xiùlán and me out of there, despite every damned squint on the station standing against us. I do not think I will ever be able to forget how you moved … how you left over fifteen dock workers unconscious, dying or dead in less than two minutes.”

“What can I say, Griff? I was extremely motivated.” I drank the last of my Kaffe and rose from the chair. Taking the mug and my dishes into the small kitchen, I washed and dried everything, then put it all away before rejoining Buchanan. He looked up at me as I came to stand behind him; laying my hands on his shoulders and squeezing lightly, I said, “Both of you were injured … Xiùlán critically so. I was not about to let them capture or kill us.” With a final squeeze on his shoulders, I dropped my hands and moved past him, saying, “Come on, Big Guy … we have a lot more work to do.”

I was just walking past my secure comms terminal when it trilled to announce a private, incoming message. After a quick glance at the ident header, I smiled and pressed the ACCEPT control. The image that resolved before me was of Liara T’Soni and Racháel Shepard. Taking a seat in front of
the viewer, I greeted them both. “Lady T’Soni … Spectre Shepard … to what do I owe the pleasure this morning?”

Liara spoke first, placing a bit of emphasis on my new title. “Shadow Broker. I am given to understand you have been rather busy with rebuilding the network.” Glancing past my shoulder, she asked, “And who might your companion be?”

Quickly looking around then back, I motioned for Griff to sit beside me as I chuckled in reply, “This big fellow is my former squad mate—the man I spoke of during our first discussion about me taking over this job—from my days in the Alliance Ø7 program, Griffen Buchanan. Griff, this is …”

Buchanan quietly interrupted me, saying, “Dr Liara T’Soni … and Spectre Rachaël Shepard. An honor to finally meet you.” With a broad grin, he added, “Sammy has told me much about you both.”

Rachaël nodded as Liara said, “The pleasure is ours, Mr Buchanan. It is a relief for me to know that Ms Traynor was able to convince you to join her; good to know she isn’t totally alone, either in the apartment or within Iringù-Eßizkur.”

Griff glanced at me as he replied, “I love Samantha as much as if she was my own sister, Ma’am. I owe her my life.”

I blushed and grinned as I gazed at the big man beside me. “Griff’s been doing a great job, getting in touch with all the field agents … those that survived the war, anyway. And, he’s been learning how to set up and use the equipment … covered my six a few days ago while I was ashore, investigating the Blue Suns.” I inadvertently allowed a shadow to cross my face as I returned my gaze to the vidscreen and asked, “Calling to check up on me, Ma’am?”

Shepard was quick to reply. “Not at all, Ms Traynor … not at all. We received a call from Omega Station – Aria’s body guard and number two, Bray. He was offering the assistance of the queen’s warships in stopping whomever is illegally recovering or stealing reclaimed eezo and selling it on the open market.” Shepard glanced at Liara before continuing, “It’s driving down the retail prices for legitimate sources …”

I interrupted, “Like Omega’s, Spectre?” With a soft chuckle, I continued, “That Aria is reaching out to you and Lady Liara is a direct result of the information we sold to Bray through our agent on Omega. Retail prices for refined eezo are going down the proverbial pyjak hole, and that is causing a great deal of harm to the legitimate markets. It was your … umm, well, my agent … on Omega, that first alerted us to the problem.”

Liara nodded in understanding. “It would seem that you are the right person for the job, Ms Traynor. I am really sorry you felt it necessary to abandon your Navy career in order to take on the mantle of the Shadow Broker.”

“Don’t be silly,” I replied softly. “It was for the best, Liara. I could not be an effective info broker if I still had to answer to the Alliance chain of command. My only real problem right now is my former captain.”

“Cody?” Shepard asked, raising her eyebrows.

I couldn’t stop the smirking expression on my face as I replied, “He still thinks of me as Specialist Traynor … I had to remind him in no uncertain terms the person he is now dealing with will not be treated or spoken to like some miserable bilge rat.” After a pause, I added, “I don’t think he’ll
make that mistake again.”

Shepard laughed at that statement. “I believe you have found your true calling, Ms Traynor.” Rachaël paused for a moment before continuing. “There were rumors during the war that the Broker—meaning Liara—had gone soft. The Broker’s promises of violent retribution were not being followed through on. I expect you’ll personally back up any threats you make … am I correct?”

“Only if I have to, Spectre. Some of the agents Buchanan has been contacting were contract enforcers for the Broker previous to Liara … I believe one of the pre-spaceflight terms for them is leg-breakers. I would prefer to refrain from having to do enforcement or wet work in the future, but if it comes down to it, I certainly won’t shy away from it.”

Shepard chuckled in return. “Understood.” After a brief pause and a glance at her bride, Rachaël looked straight at the screen and said, “Okay, Shadow Broker. I will contact the Alliance brass—probably Admiral Hackett—and relay Aria’s offer of assistance. I may even suggest that Harbinger move the stockpile of recovered, refined eezo from Widow to Sahrabarik, where Aria can provide better security.”

I smiled in response as I said, “That would be wonderful, Spectre. The only reason the Repository-recovered eezo was stored near the Citadel was for convenience, as Tali’Zorah and I were working to restore Žiuk’Durmah’s source of power.” Nodding my head, I added, “Congratulations on your bonding, Rachaël … and Liara. I’m truly sorry I was unable to be there for the ceremony. Perhaps I’ll come see you next time I have a couple of days to myself.”

Liara beamed, saying, “You … and Xiùlán, of course … are more than welcome to visit, anytime. It’s been wonderful chatting with you … Shadow Broker. Please … stay safe, both of you.”

Sammy’s view of the pair faded to black as they terminated the connection.

♦ SSV HONG KONG · NEAR ELYSIUM, VETUS SYSTEM · PETRA NEBULA ♦

“Long-range sensors just got a hit, Captain. Too far out for a positive ident, but preliminary analysis indicates a small vessel, no larger than an escort corvette. Just cleared the relay … on course for Joppa, probably to discharge its drive core.” Lieutenant Jack Cross looked up at the woman standing on the platform at the rear of the projection well for the galaxy map, currently set to display the planetary system in which the Hong Kong was operating. “Location is marked on the system map for you, Ma’am.”

Captain Yuán Xiùlán nodded in acknowledgement as she replied, “Thank you, Lieutenant.” She studied the relative distance of Joppa from Elysium before turning her attention to the bright, red dots representing the other three vessels—affiliation unknown—that had entered the system after the Hong Kong’s arrival. In addition to what now consisted of four unknowns near the hydrogen-helium planet, there was an additional vessel Specialist Lawson had identified as a Blue Suns corvette. Xiùlán glanced at Miranda as she queried, “Any luck in identifying our four visitors, Ms Lawson?”

“All four are on the far side of Vetus, Ma’am,” replied the specialist. “Interference from the star’s magnetosphere is affecting long-range scans.”

“Based on their mass and energy signatures, do they match the corvette we have identified?”

Miranda, continuing to scan the four vessels despite the interference caused by the star, replied,
“They all *seem* to match each other, Ma’am.” The former Cerberus agent, continuing to analyze the results of her long-range scans, added, “Based on the very limited readings we’ve been able to gather, each possesses a mass that is no greater than the corvette we’ve already identified.”

Lieutenant Cross glanced over Miranda’s shoulder, then addressed Yuán. “Captain, all four are in orbit around Joppa’s northern hemisphere; perhaps if we repositioned the ship above the galactic plane?”

Xiùlán studied the graphic display of the system spread out before her. Touching a control on her display console, she caused the apparent viewpoint to shift from 90 degrees above to an angle 10 degrees above the system’s orbital plane; this skinned across the planetary orbital disk. After studying the system from this new perspective, she touched another control and spoke, seeming to address the air above her. “Asharru. Please reposition to 1.2 million kilometers positive zed, then scan and identify the four ships orbiting Joppa.”

After waiting a few moments, the ancient voice of the *Hong Kong*’s self-appointed Guardian Repository replied, ›Repositioning as requested, Yuán-Captain. Standby for scan results‹.

Xiùlán watched the display as an image—a blue dot, actually—appeared and seemed to detach itself from the graphic depiction of the *Hong Kong*; it rose rapidly as Asharru accelerated, leaving a computer-generated trail of tiny blue dots depicting its path. After 20 seconds, the apparent motion visibly slowed, then halted. The cold, metallic voice stated, ›Scanning … standby‹.

Miranda suddenly began entering instructions on her terminal as data from the destroyer-class Repository started streaming into her comms array. In less than ten minutes, Asharru had stopped sending data and was returning to a position alongside the *Hong Kong*. Miranda cleared her throat and quietly spoke with Lieutenant Cross for several moments; returning her attention to Yuán, she said, “Captain, the four vessels orbiting Joppa appear to be turian-designed corvettes. The scans indicate all were formerly registered under Cerberus ownership.”

Xiùlán expressed a look of shock at this information. “Turian, you say. I didn’t think Harper would have anything to do with alien tech, no matter its superiority to equivalently designed and constructed human vessels.”

Miranda looked at her captain with the slightest hint of a smirk in her grin. “Jack Harper always figured he could take any ship, from any source, and improve on its design, Ma’am … make it better, more efficient. Case in point, the *Normandy SR-2*.”

Xiùlán replied with a taut smile. “If anyone here would know Jack’s thinking back then, it would be you, Miranda.” Her smile shifted to a slight frown as she asked, “This may be wishful thinking, but does the data happen to include the launch dates? Maybe where they were constructed?”

“Actually …” Miranda paused as she scrolled through the specifications; pausing at the section she wanted to inspect, she continued as she read, “… all of them were constructed prior to the battle with Sovereign and Saren at the Citadel. The designs may be turian, but Cord-Hislop manufactured all four of them … probably built the one orbiting Sidon as well.” As Miranda continued looking through the data collected by Asharru, she added, “Their armor is consistent with design standards of ten to fifteen years ago, as is their weaponry, which appears to only be defensive in nature.”

“Has our presence been detected … by any of them?”

Lieutenant Cross answered, saying, “Indications are that none of the five are aware of us, Captain.”
Yuán-Captain. I am projecting a dampening field that deflects any scans directed at our location. The vessels at Joppa and the vessel at Sidon are unable to detect my structure, nor are they able to detect frigate-Hong Kong.

Xiùlán grinned as she shifted her attention between Cross and Lawson while listening to the Repository. The tone of Asharru’s metallic voice sounded somewhat … self-satisfied … smug, even. Thinking it best to not comment on this, she simply replied, “Thank you, Asharru.” Fixing her gaze on Miranda, she said, “Continue studying the specs on those ships, Specialist … see if there’s anything else you can learn about them. I’m going to my quarters for a few minutes … I need a short break. Lieutenant Cross, you have the ship.”

Receiving verbal acknowledgements from Cross and Lawson, Xiùlán stepped off the raised platform, walked through the port side hatch and down the stairs to Deck Two. Pausing in the galley long enough to retrieve a fresh mug of tea, she went to her quarters; once inside, she brought out the secure comms device given to her by Samantha Traynor. With the unit powered on, she trans-copied all the collected data concerning the five ships in the system. Once that was done, she initiated the transmitter section and sent everything to the pre-programmed destination; the microburst of data was on its way in a matter of seconds.

After securing the device and placing it in her storage locker, she sat behind her desk, leaned back in her chair and placed the heels of her boots on the edge. Taking a sip of tea, she gave silent thanks to her ancestors that Sammy had sent her a warning about these vessels. Xiùlán wondered what Sammy would make of the contents of the message she had just sent. Just another challenge for her, came the thought. Hope she can give me some feedback without too much delay.

♦ NOS AEDELOS, ILLIUM · TASALE SYSTEM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

Jona Sederis shut down the data terminal and let out a small, self-satisfied chuckle—which quickly morphed into an extended coughing fit. Upon regaining control of her spasming diaphragm, she used a tissue to wipe the small amount of mucus from the corners of her disfigured mouth.

The crazed asari, once one of the most feared leaders of any of the galaxy’s mercenary gangs, had been reduced to a half-cripple, unable to do anything without suffering sometimes intense physical pain. While it was true that she had escaped confinement on the Citadel, that escape had only been facilitated by the numerous explosions on the station; one such had shattered the structure of the wing where those judged to be criminally insane—like Sederis—were confined.

In order to make her escape, she had been forced to run through sheets of chemically-fueled flames so intense her biotic barrier could not protect her. She had suffered numerous burns—some severe enough to burn the skin from her body—along with damage to her lungs from inhaling the toxic fumes and superheated smoke. Worse—to her mind, anyway—her crest had been severely burned; the top of her head now looked not unlike that of a turian female; this, along with the burns to her face, had utterly destroyed whatever beauty she had possessed. An unfortunate side-effect from her many injuries was that she no longer possessed the strength to utilize her biotics, even defensively. She had quickly discovered the mental strain of erecting a simple barrier was more than enough to put her on her knees, gasping for breath.

Even though she had chosen to live as a recluse, she was still able to direct the Eclipse; the group’s latest foray into the commodities market had turned out to be quite profitable. Sederis wasn’t personally concerned about profiting from the sale of illegally recovered eezo; what had her chuckling was that Eclipse was hurting Aria T’Loak. Sederis had discovered Aria’s weakness and intended to exploit it for every last credit she could.
After I spoke with Spectre Shepard and Doctor T'Soni to request Shepard’s assistance, Griff had spent the rest of the morning and part of the early afternoon searching for non-violent options to address the problems triggered by sales of illegally obtained Element Zero. We were both counting on Spectre Shepard’s promise to speak with Admiral Hackett; the hope being he could persuade Aria T’Loak to commit a portion of Omega’s fleet of warships to monitor the stockpiles of loose eezo, particularly the large amount of recovered eezo sitting near the Widow relay.

In the meantime, I was delving into the backgrounds of the five vessels my Qíngrén was monitoring in the Vetus System; from the very limited amount of evidence she had transmitted to me, I had been able to glean a great deal more information concerning the former Cerberus vessels. Utilizing my access to all the records Liara had retrieved from Jack Harper’s private quarters inside the shattered remains of Cronos Station, I learned the vessel orbiting Sidon was a former Blue Suns corvette named Red Serpent; its specified crew complement had numbered forty-three when it was launched by Cord-Hislop in 2169. It wasn’t surprising to learn that the Serpent’s last known location was the Anadius System. Most likely disabled while defending the station from Alliance-allied warships supporting Commander Shepard’s mission to retrieve the stolen Prothean data, came the thought. Blue Suns must have adopted the quarian’s habit of salvaging derelict ships.

In short order, I had the names and launch dates of the other four ships Xiùlán was monitoring. Of some surprise, I discovered the mercenaries had not bothered to rename any of the ships they had appropriated and restored to service. Dragon’s Greed and Dragon’s Avarice were sister ships; slightly smaller than Red Serpent, they had been launched within a week of each other in 2167. While each had originally been crewed by thirty-nine people, I fully believed that advances since that time in shipboard AI’s and automated equipment would have reduced the total crew requirement for each vessel by a third, to a range of from twenty-six to twenty-nine people.

Each of the remaining two ships had launched a year apart—Noble Wyvern in the fall of 2170 and Eva’s Smile in the spring of 2171—and had originally been crewed by thirty-five people each. Each of these corvettes had been equipped with the best ablative armor and kinetic barriers available at the time, while weaponry was limited to disruptor torpedo launchers and anti-fighter laser turrets. Try as I might, I could not uncover what, if any, upgrades to the weapons systems the Blue Suns may have installed. My thought was that—given enough time—I could discover exactly what upgrades had been applied to each of the ships, but I felt a group as aggressive as the Suns would not have hesitated to hang as many launchers and turrets on these ships as their systems could manage. It was hard for me to imagine that one, or even two of these ships would be a match for the Hong Kong, but my gut was telling me that all five attacking with coordinated strikes
just might be able to disable—or destroy—the frigate.

Another thought caused my stomach to clench; what if the Suns possessed a few larger vessels? With that in mind, I chained two of the processors together and bent them to the task of searching for every ship registration tied—no matter how remotely—to the Blue Suns.

While that search was being processed, I studied the capabilities of the five ships I had identified. In addition to their prowess at ship-to-ship combat in space, these vessels were fully capable of making planetary landings; this would allow the Blue Suns to place soldiers on the ground with relative ease. My analysis of each ship’s hull configuration confirmed my fears that they would be quite useful for abducting colonists for the slave trade. It was really distressing to learn the merc group had turned to kidnapping and trafficking so soon after the Reaper War had ended.

It was nearing midday, and my stomach had begun growling in displeasure; my glance at the chrono on the end of the counter confirmed the alarm being sent by my rumbling stomach, so I decided to take a break. Copying all the data I had assembled concerning the ships Xiùlán was monitoring in Elysium’s system, I uploaded it to my secure comms device, activated the transmitter and sent it off to my Qíngrén, thinking, I certainly hope she doesn’t have to deal with more than the five ships that are already there. Looking at Griff, I said, “Hey, Buchanan. I’m going out for a bite to eat … I should be back in ninety.”

♦ JERON’S CAFÉ, DELTA WARD ♦

I slid into the chair behind my favorite table after pausing on the way in to order a sandwich and a beer. While waiting for my order, I activated my omnitool to check the vid-news summaries aimed at the average civilian; it was no surprise that ANN, the main news source for billions of Alliance citizens, made no mention about the crashing price of eezo. The quality and credibility of their reporting, particularly their investigative reporting, had suffered tremendously after Emily Wong’s death—while she was doing live updates, no less—in the first hours of the Reaper invasion against Earth. A shiver ran down my spine as I thought back to my own narrow escape from Vancouver that day; had I not been working on the Normandy, I could just as easily have met the same fate.

Glancing up at the sound of the entry door opening and closing, I winced upon recognizing the man that had come in. Choosing to take no obvious notice of him, I continued to browse through ANN’s news feed. In less than a minute, it was painfully clear that ignoring the presence of the Alliance Naval officer hadn’t worked; a shadow fell across the table and a familiar voice asked, “May I join you, Ms Traynor?” Shit! Just my fucking luck! I pretended to be surprised as I looked up at Normandy Captain Bill Cody, waiting calmly on the other side of the table. I closed the interface on my omnitool with a small sigh of resignation, gave him a curt nod and waved a hand at the empty chair.

He replied by smiling slightly while pulling out the chair; before he could sit, a waiter approached with my sandwich and beer. After setting utensils wrapped in a napkin and a tall glass filled with foamy amber liquid on the table, he placed the plate bearing my sandwich in front of me, then looked expectantly at Cody, who said, “I’ll have what she’s having,” before easing himself into the chair across from me.

As the young man went back to the kitchen, I deliberately tilted my head to the right as I asked, “What brings you out here today, Cap’n?” then silently regarded him as I took a bite from my sandwich and chewed.

Cody narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked at me. “Thought I’d get a spot of lunch ashore today, Ms Traynor.” After several moments he added with a thin smile, “I’m actually glad to see
you here … it’ll save me from having to contact you later.”

I noticed his smile hadn’t reached his eyes … never a good sign. After taking a couple of swallows of beer, I set the glass back in the ring of condensation it had left on the table. “You can talk about anything you like, Cap’n, as long as it’s not official business … or my business.”

Cody clasped his hands together at the edge of the table and leaned back in his chair. “Since I’m still breathing and speaking with you, I want to offer my apologies for my unprofessional behavior at the start of our previous conversation. There really was no excuse for my conduct … I’m sorry.”

I responded to this with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Yesterday’s news, Cap’n. We each need to find our way forward after everything that’s happened these past few months … hell! These past few years … to each of us.” I took another bite from my sandwich as the waiter brought a sandwich and a glass of beer to the table; setting Cody’s lunch in front of him, he looked at me expectantly and asked, “Another beer, Ma’am?” Cody murmured his appreciation as I shook my head and replied, “Not just yet, thanks.”

Bill started eating his sandwich as he looked at me; after chewing and swallowing, he took a drink from his glass, then said, “With that out of the way, I have a progress report for you, Ms Traynor.” Seeing my expression, he quickly added, “No business.” Upon observing my reluctant nod of acceptance, he continued. “After speaking with the Admiral this morning, he agreed to cut orders for the Normandy … we’re going to oversee the relocation of that pile of eezo out by the relay.”

Finishing the first half of my sandwich and taking another sip of beer from my glass, I picked up the other half and waited without comment for Cody to take another bite from his own sandwich. After chewing and swallowing, he took a couple of swallows of beer, then set the glass down, where he idly spun it about in the ring of condensation on the table while saying, “Harbinger has assigned several of the destroyers to the task of relocating the stuff; since they can handle refined eezo with no ill effects, they’ll move it all to a location being reserved near Omega Station. Once it’s out of this system and in Aria’s backyard, it will totally be her problem to deal with.”

Unconsciously mirroring Cody, I idly spun my own glass in its condensation ring while asking, “And the recovery efforts at Earth, Palaven and all the colonies?”

Bill slowly brought his glass up to take a swallow of the contents before replying. “Ongoing. As you are no doubt aware, the remnants of the Alliance Navy is stretched pretty damned thin. Harbinger has directed more Reaper destroyers to assist in the recovery efforts, but there is also the issue of the still broken mass relays in the outlying systems.” He shook his head slightly as he quietly directed his attention back to finishing his lunch. After draining the beer from his glass, he continued, “The task of repairing all the infrastructure civilization depends on is one of epic proportions … Herculean, to put it bluntly. Everyone’s been going at it for more than a year, and the reports I’ve seen indicate we’ve barely made more than a dent.”

I held my glass up to gain the attention of our waiter as I said, “I hate to ask, but, …” I studied him intently as I finished, “… recovery of people, spaced during the war? I know from Master Guns Patton that the Shanghai was heavily involved … how’s that going?”

Bill nodded, a bit of sadness creeping into his expression. “Thanks to our former adversaries, the majority of that portion of the recovery—at least over Earth—has been completed.” He closed his eyes as he squeezed the bridge of his nose between thumb and finger. “Unfortunately, not everyone spaced made it into the void whole; it’s all the pieces … people ripped apart by explosive decomp, or those cut into pieces when they were slammed into sharp edges, that they’re attempting to recover.”
The waiter brought two full glasses of beer to our table; after setting them down, he picked up empty glasses and plates and silently departed. On impulse, I reached across the table; grasping the hand of my former captain, I sighed, “I heard about Xiùlán tasking the Repositories with recovering the organic remains, Bill. I would have expected the job to be nearly complete by now. Were there really *that* many people spaced during the battles over Earth?”

Cody looked down at my hand before returning his scrutiny to my eyes as I regarded him in a gaze of sympathy for comrades ... *our* comrades, dammit! ... forever lost to a brutal war. “We may never have a full accounting of the cost in lives, Samantha, and just to be clear, a helluva lot of turians, quarians, krogan and salarians also died in the skies over Earth. We can guess at the cost by listing the crew complement of each ship that was destroyed, or by counting remaining crew aboard damaged ships with compartments open to space, but honestly? ...” He shrugged his shoulders as he grew silent. Picking up the glass in front of him, he knocked back a fourth of the contents and sighed as he set it back down.

I gave the hand I was holding a slight squeeze before releasing it to pick up my own glass. After taking several swallows, I leaned back in the chair and asked, “Have you heard any more about the undesirables living in the apartments overlooking the docks?”

Cody returned his attention to my face, a bit of amusement evident in his expression. “There has been some discussion ... nothing I can confirm, of course ...” he said with a wink, “that the upper floors of those two buildings will be made available to Alliance officers at a discounted rate. Of course, there won’t be any of the fancy monitoring equipment left behind. Funny, that.”

I polished off the rest of my beer; smiling as I set the empty glass down and stood from my chair, I placed my hip against the table and laid a hand on Bill’s shoulder as I looked down and said, “I hate to admit it, but I’ve enjoyed our meal together, Captain. Perhaps we can do this again, sometime soon?”

Cody looked up at me as he answered, “I think I’d like that ... Samantha ... very much.”

Nodding as I released his shoulder, I walked away from the table to the front counter, where I paid for my lunch ... and his. With a quick glance over my shoulder at the man’s back, I went through the door and walked briskly back to my speeder.

♦

SSV HONG KONG, NEAR ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

Captain Yuán Xiùlán had spent a bit of time studying the ship specifications forwarded to her by her Qíngrén; after copying the data file to the ship’s combat computer archive, she was meeting with Lieutenant Cross and Specialist Lawson in the conference and comms compartment between Decks One and Two.

As was his way, Cross had studied the specs of each of the five ships without comment or question, preferring to wait until he had considered each one thoroughly before asking questions. Looking up, he commented, “Appears each was originally well-armed.” After a moment, he snorted. “I suppose it would be too much to hope that the Blue Suns removed any of the guns or launchers.”

Xiùlán chuckled slightly, amused at his attempt at levity. “Yeah, I suppose the unfortunate truth is that each of those ships has been up-armored and retrofitted with more and improved ablative cladding and additional advanced weaponry. They will certainly present a challenge.”

“You don’t believe they’re here simply as a result of blind chance?” came the snarky rejoinder.
Xiùlán studied her XO’s face intently, attempting to ascertain if he was posing a rhetorical question, or honestly expected an answer. Deciding to believe the latter, she responded in a quiet voice, “I don’t believe the Blue Suns ever rely on blind chance to accomplish their goals, Jack. They always have a plan, and it is invariably about profit.”

The expression on Lieutenant Cross’s face was a mixture of incredulity and disbelief. “You believe they’re here to attack Elysium? … kidnap a bunch of colonists for the slave trade?”

With a heavy sigh, Yuán replied, “I can think of no other reason for five Blue Suns warships to be in a dead end system, Lieutenant.” She continued to watch the tactical projection of the system as it tracked the positions of the five corvettes. “They cannot claim to simply be passing through on their way to someplace else. Only question now is, what are they waiting for? The four in orbit about Joppa seem content to stay where they are, as does the corvette in orbit about Sidon; they haven’t detected our presence, so what’s their plan?”

At this point, Specialist Lawson ventured an opinion. “Ma’am, if I may? My guess is they’re simply waiting for reinforcements. As small as those five are, they could easily be damaged or destroyed by Elysium’s orbital defense net, even though it hasn’t been restored to its pre-war level. Do the Blue Suns possess anything heavier? … Any frigates, or light-cruiser class vessels?”

“Good question, Specialist … one I will forward on up the chain.” Xiùlán didn’t expect she would need to ask the question of her Inamorata. If I know Sà mǐ, she’s already looking for answers.

♦ SHADOW BROKER’S RESIDENCE · BRAVO WARD, CITADEL ♦

After parking the speeder, I descended the spiral staircase from the rooftop garage and went straight to my room, there to eliminate the beer I had downed and remove my armor and weapons. Griff knocked on the outer door as I was removing my under-armor skins. “Just a sec …” I said, loud enough for him to hear through the panel. Pulling on a pair of shorts and a crop top tee-shirt after pulling on a clean pair of panties, I padded across the floor in my bare feet and released the lock on the door; calling out as it opened, I asked, “What do you need, Griff?”

Buchanan pushed off from the wall beside the door and turned to face me. “I may have discovered a way to curb the sales of illegally obtained eezo … it is rather simplistic, but that may be the only way it can work.” He followed me as I strolled to the console to check our data feeds.

“Anything proposed will have to be simple, Griff.” I inspected the paired servers examining the Blue Suns’ ship registries before turning to face him, fisted hands firmly on my hips.

Crossing his arms over his chest and cocking back on one leg, he said, “By its very nature, eezo is a hazardous substance … especially the refined element. In order to safely handle the material, one has to trained in the proper methods of minimizing exposure, not only to the handler but the uninformed general public.” Griff uncrossed his arms and took a seat in the chair beside me. “In every one of the places I searched regarding the industry, I could find no rules mandating that companies refining or selling the stuff need to have safety rules in place to protect workers and the public … no matter if it’s Illium, Omega, or someplace in the Terminus. There should be enforceable rules … regulations … regarding the safe handling of the material, from mine, to refinery, to storage, to sales.”

My mouth fell open at this information. “Geez, Griff! Do the governing bodies in these places think the companies will simply look out for their worker’s and the public’s benefit out of the goodness of their hearts?”
Buchanan smiled as he leaned back in his chair. “I can only speak for humans on Earth, Sammy, but the slow slide down the slippery slope of decreasing regulations began in the early 21st century as the planet came to be increasingly dominated by a few powerful, multi-national companies. Profit was being increasingly pursued with no regard to worker safety—it was as if the CEO’s of those businesses cared nothing for those that enabled the payments of their insanely inflated salaries.”

“What were the governments doing, Griff? They’re supposed to keep their citizens safe, correct?” My question sounded a lot snarkier than I’d intended.

Griff leaned forward again; referring to a monitor in front of him, he said in an especially grim tone of voice, “By the time the so called regulators woke up to the health and welfare issues brought on by profit-driven greed, it was too late; the very companies that were causing the majority of the problems were in positions to effectively control the governments.”

“What about free elections? Certainly …”

Buchanan interrupted my question with a bitter laugh at my seeming naiveté. Standing, he began to pace as he continued to speak. “Elections were rigged, behind the scenes. The machines used for voting had become completely computerized, Sammy. You, of all people, must realize what a windfall that was for the big corporations. The will of the majority no longer mattered … and still doesn’t, to this day.”

I thought about this in silence as Griff came up behind me. Placing his hands on my shoulders, he added, “With the Reaper War concluded, things have gradually been going back to the way they were before Sovereign appeared … and it just occurred to me that you could have an influence … a positive influence … on these things going forward.”

Turning my head to look back and up at his face as he leaned over me, I asked, “You mean … tipping elections? Ensuring the people who should be in power actually get there?”

“Exactly! If the elections are already being rigged, it would be relatively simple to ensure the right people are appointed or elected.”

Trapping my lower lip in my teeth for a moment, I carefully considered Griff’s words. Letting the captured lip slowly slide out past my teeth, I said in a soft voice, “As tempting as that idea is, that’s not what we’re here to do, Griff … it’s not the way I want us to operate. This position is unique in all the galaxy, and I don’t want us to succumb to the temptation to abuse it.” Covering the hands atop my shoulders with my own, I added, “The Broker eliminated by Shepard and T’Soni during the Collector campaign used … or abused … his position to influence the outcomes of a great many contests across the galaxy.”

Griff slipped his hands out from under mine as he declared, “Precisely, Sammy. Why should we do things any differently?”

Standing, I slowly turned to face him as I rolled the chair aside; bringing my arms up, I placed my hands against the center of his chest and tilted my head back; capturing his greenish-gray eyes with a steady gaze, I answered, “Because we’re not Cerberus, or the League of One, or Homeward Sol, Griffen Buchanan. We’re not Terra Firma.” Sighing deeply, I placed my forehead against his chest and spoke with all the conviction I could muster. “I brought you into this because I needed someone with me that can watch my back, but I also need you to help keep us focused, Griff. Our primary task …” I paused to swallow and take a step back away from him. Raising both hands above my head, I waved slightly while turning around, indicating all the equipment in the room. “our only task, is to gather and sell information. Any divergence from that path, no matter our
intention, is a waste of these resources … and our time. We only have one chance to get this right, Griff.”

By now, Buchanan was holding his own hands up in surrender. “I apologize, Sammy … you are absolutely correct. But you do see my point, don’t you?”

I nodded as I returned to my chair and replied, “I can see your point quite clearly, Griff, but the best thing we can do right now is make sure those companies marketing hazardous materials, particularly eezo, are utilizing every safety measure that’s required of them. Any found to be skirting the few regulations that are in place need to have their permits revoked, and that’s something you can research.”

With a wink and a nod, Griff grinned as he returned to his terminal with a renewed sense of purpose.

♦ SSV HONG KONG, NEAR ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

Captain Yuán Xiùlán felt as if her head had barely touched the pillow in her berth when she was startled awake by the soft, tri-toned alarm of an incoming message on the secure comms device given to her by Sammy. With a tired sigh, she blindly reached over to the device and, after several attempts, managed to touch the ACCEPT control; this quieted the alert signal immediately, but she had a sneaking hunch it would begin its tri-tone song again within twenty or thirty minutes. Gāisǐ, Sà mī… Nǐ zěnme zhīdào wǒ shuìzhe? [該死, 薩米… 你怎麼知道我睡著了?] came the silent accusation. The device remained stubbornly mute.

Not wishing to have her sleep disturbed again, Xiùlán rolled out of bed and padded the three steps to her desk. Turning the red belt-rail lights on to their dimmest setting, she activated the vid-terminal on her desk and linked it to the secure comms unit that had interrupted her sleep. Xiùlán was not surprised at the image that resolved on the view screen; the surprise was the bad news that Sà mī had sent.

Traynor had discovered the Blue Suns were in possession of a pair of light cruisers, launched in late 2181. The Guardiан and the Vigilance had been constructed to then state-of-the-art Systems Alliance specifications at Cord-Hislop Aerospace’s main shipyard before the Eden Prime War in 2183; as with the corvettes Xiùlán was monitoring, this pair of Cerberus ships had been damaged and abandoned near Minuteman Station. The Blue Suns had boarded and repaired them just enough so they could be limped through the relays to a friendly repair facility orbiting Illium. Using the relay logs in Widow, Pax, Utopia and Vetus, Traynor had determined that only one ship was traveling; it had taken her a couple of hours of exacting work to trace the Vigilance to the Pax system. Back-tracing the ship’s movements from there, she managed to discover it had departed eight days ago from Balor in the Caleston Rift; she had yet to determine the location of the Guardian, but was continuing to search for it. In the meantime, the Broker cautioned Xiùlán to be on the lookout for the arrival of the Vigilance, warning that the Blue Suns would probably not commit either of their cruisers to Vetus until after the corvettes already in system had begun their attack on Elysium.

Xiùlán briefly looked at the specs for each ship before copying the data to the pair of consoles used by Specialist Lawson and Lieutenant Cross in the CIC on Deck One; she next sent a MESSAGE RECEIVED affirmation back to the originating transmitter. After drinking a glass of water, she crawled back in bed. With any luck, I’ll get another three or four hours before I have to get up.
Xiùlán was abruptly roused from her slumber by the distinctive sound of an alarm, blaring its strident noise throughout the ship from the overhead speakers. Placing her comm-link in her ear, she activated the device and said, “Duty Officer—Sitrep.”

“The Blue Suns’ corvettes have left orbit and joined up over Elysium. A light cruiser just entered the system and is on an intercept course for the planet, ETA five hours at its current velocity. Hull configuration matches the Vigilance, Ma’am.”

“Has the cruiser deviated to discharge its drive core?”

“No, Ma’am.

“Roger that.” Xiùlán absolutely hated the position she was in, but saw no alternative to the course of action she needed to follow. “Notify the planetary defense command, immediately … they need to stop those corvettes before they can make landfall, or they’ll play hell getting them off the planet. Send a message to Alliance Fleet Command at Arcturus so they know what’s happening. I’ll be up there in five minutes.” After using the toilet, she hurriedly scrubbed the sleep from her face, brushed and retied her hair, then got dressed and left her quarters. After a quick stop at the galley to grab a mug of coffee, she ascended the circular staircase to Deck One, where she found Lieutenant Cross updating the tactical display overlaying the portion of the galaxy map depicting the Vetus System, and Specialist Lawson in hushed conversation over her comms.

Miranda, looking up from her comms interface, reported, “Ma’am. We have confirmation from Elysium’s defense command … they are tracking the corvettes and have their ground installations activated, along with their orbiting defenses. Their commander feels confident he can keep five civilian commanded corvettes from making landfall.”

“Thank you, Specialist. Lieutenant?”

“The Vigilance is still inbound,” Cross responded quietly as he split his attention between the graphical display and his captain. “I do not believe any of them are aware of our presence.”

I am still projecting a dampening field around Hong Kong-frigate, an ancient voice intoned.

For the third time since her mission to rescue Miranda Lawson from Blue Suns captivity in the ruined city of Vancouver, Xiùlán silently thanked her ancestors that Asharru, the Destroyer-class Repository discovered and rescued from Luna, chose to accompany the Hong Kong everywhere it traveled. “Thank you, Asharru. Please stand by.”

Looking at the tactical display, she noticed the Vigilance had just passed through the thin asteroid belt located outside the orbit of Joppa. “Lieutenant, plot an intercept course to bring us up behind that vessel. As soon as we’re there, I’ll warn them; if they so much as twitch, we’ll take out their engineering section … I’m not going to screw around with this bastard. Something tells me the Suns added substantially to that ship’s armament. With the exception of Asharru, there’s no one else out here that can assist us if we get tagged by that thing.”

Cross’s lips were set in a firm, straight line as he replied, “Aye, Ma’am,” and set about his task.

Thinking about Elysium had reminded Yuán of something else about this system. “Specialist, have you sent a warning to Grissom Academy?”

“Yes, Ma’am … they’ve acknowledged the warning and are taking what precautions they can.”

“Sounds like they haven’t been able to repair the station’s defenses.”
“No, Ma’am. Station personnel are at a bare minimum for safe operation.” Miranda studied her display screen. “They don’t have enough people to spare for anything beyond light reconstruction of the habitat areas.”

“Roger that, Specialist. Any indication the Suns are targeting the station?”

“None of their ships have approached it. Perhaps it’s not perceived to be a good source of slaves.”

“Excellent. Continue to monitor their status, Mr Cross. Cerberus made a shambles of the place early in the war. I don’t want them sustaining more damage on top of the previous destruction.”

“Aye, Ma’am.”

Seeming to address the air above her, Xiùlán said, “Asharru. Please contact Harbinger and explain the situation we are facing here … request that he send Žiuk’Durmah as backup and inform him we would welcome the additional support.”

I will make the request, Yuán-Captain.

♦ NOS AEDELOS, ILLIUM · TASALE SYSTEM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

“They’re doing what!?” Jona Sederis reacted to this latest bit of unwelcome news exactly as she always did, resulting in an extended coughing fit that left her gasping for breath. Her lieutenant, having been the unfortunate soul chosen to deliver unpleasant news to her leader, stood absolutely still and gazed at her own booted feet. Sederis was bad-tempered most of the time; having just seen and heard the insane asari seemingly attempting to cough her lungs out of her chest, Suvanni D’Klan waited silently for the blow she feared was coming.

As Sederis got her breathing back under control, she directed her angry gaze at D’Klan’s calm façade. “What in Goddess’ name are they thinking, ’Vanni?” A bout of coughing interrupted her; after once again gaining control of her spasming diaphragm, she continued with, “Who’s the brilliant strategist that dreamed up this idea?”

Suvanni directed her gaze at a point just past Jona’s shoulder as she calmly responded in a quiet voice, “Started with Spectre Shepard, Ma’am. Apparently, Omega’s queen complained about the price of eezo sliding down the proverbial Varren hole. Shepard convinced Admiral Hackett to relocate that great stinkin’ pile of material from the Widow System to a place close enough that the bitch can keep an eye on it … prevent pilfering.”

“Goddess be damned, ’Vanni! … that stinking human has been a pain in my ass since before the war! And T’Loak doesn’t own that fucking pile of eezo! No one does … that’s why it’s been so profitable … for me!” The extended silence following her outburst was broken only by the harsh sound of Jona’s wheezing attempts to breathe normally. After thinking about the problem for several minutes, she asked, “Are there any other places the recovered stuff is being stored? … places that are not being monitored so closely?”

D’Klan nodded once as she replied, “There’s a fairly large amount sitting near the repaired relay in Arcturus.” Before Sederis could protest, Suvanni hurriedly continued, “With Arcturus Station destroyed and the decimation of the Alliance fleets, not a lot of eyes are available to monitor the situation there, Ma’am.”

“Two additional relays to traverse, ’Vanni.” Sederis placed an oxy-mask over her nose and mouth in order to ease the ache in her lungs. After a few breaths, she added, “Additional distance means
more travel time and fuel costs.” Another brief pause. “Find out what Eclipse needs to do in order to begin ‘borrowing’ from that pile of material, ‘Vanni. We need to keep the pressure on Omega’s miserable whore. The more unstable the price of eezo becomes, the more uncertain her ass will sit on her throne.”

♦ SHADOW BROKER’S RESIDENCE · BRAVO WARD ♦

I had been enjoying a late lunch when an unexpected comms call from Buchanan—working in the research center inside Iringù-Eßizkur—disturbed the silence inside our apartment ashore. “Sammy, Asharru just relayed a request to Harbinger for some heavy backup in the Vetus System.”

“The Hong Kong?” My heart clenched. Pushing down a wave of panic for the safety of my Inamorata, I asked, “What’s going on?”

“Iringù-Eßizkur did not receive any specific information, Sammy, but if I had to guess, I’d say the Vigilance arrived in system, which means the Hong Kong and Elysium are now facing six very capable warships. If that is the case, the Blue Suns are making their move … the cruiser will take up an overwatch position while the corvettes raid the colonies there and on Sidon.”

“Shit! Okay, Griff … whether or not Harbinger, Esiz’Qür or Žiuk’Durmah travel to that system, we’re going. Check your gear … and the food stores. I want to hit the relay in an hour.” After taking a couple of deep, calming breaths, I reactivated the comms terminal and said, “Iringù-Eßizkur. Make ready to leave the station. We need to be in the Vetus System as soon as we can.”

›I am ready to lift off as soon as you arrive, Shadow Broker.<

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-EßIZKUR, AT LARGE ♦

I had stored our speeder and brought the groceries I had purchased—fresh foods and frozen meals—into Irin’s habitat section; I busied myself putting everything away, including the food and beer Griff had hastily bought for us. Looking at the stockpile gave my confidence level a much needed boost; I did not want to repeat having to survive on field rats as I had been forced to do after Steve Cortez had crashed our shuttle inside Harbinger, as the giant construct had attempted to escape the explosion of Žiuk’Durmah’s ejected eezo core in the Sol System.

After getting our kitchen squared away, I activated Irin’s comm terminal in the research area to let her know she was free to leave the Citadel and set her course for Vetus. As soon as she acknowledged me, I retreated to my sleeping quarters to get all my travel gear stored away; once that was done, I met with Buchanan in the lounge. “Can you give me a Sitrep?”

“Esiz’Qür is traveling to the system. I’ve been monitoring chatter among Alliance ships; Normandy will be leaving the Citadel, but I get the impression Cody will only be going as far as the Exodus Cluster.” Griff used his omnitool to have the bulkhead mounted monitor display the section of the galaxy map in question. “Only way anyone can leave Vetus is to return to Utopia, so Normandy will wait for any ships that enter the cluster from there. More importantly, Žiuk’Durmah will be accompanying Normandy. I sincerely doubt any of those corvettes—or hell, even that light cruiser—can damage a capitol Reaper that’s fully prepared to eliminate them.”

›Repositories will not terminate innocent lives, Buchanan-Griffen.<

“None of the people working for the Blue Suns are innocents, Irin,” I responded before Griff could answer. “They’re attempting to kidnap innocent people from the colonies in order to sell them into
slavery, and they’ll use every weapon at their disposal to achieve that goal.”

“The Alliance doesn’t have enough ships to defend all the human colonies, Iringù-Eßizkur,” Griff added. “It’ll be up to us to keep those pirates from succeeding.” Griff glanced at me as he concluded, “You may have to preemptively defend yourself—and us—against attack … by any or all of those six vessels. Will you do that?”

We waited a number of minutes for an answer; I was nearly ready to prompt her when she finally replied, “My continued existence matters. The safety of my human companions is a priority. I will do what I must … to protect myself from damage … protect my companions from injury.

“I know what we’re asking of you is not easy, Iringù-Eßizkur. If it helps, think of all the innocent lives on Elysium, and on the Hong Kong.” I paused a moment before concluding, “The Blue Suns make a living by preying on the weak … the defenseless. It’s a situation that absolutely must not be allowed to continue.”

“I will do what is needed, Shadow Broker.”

♦ SSV HONG KONG, NEAR ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

Miranda Lawson touched the comlink in her ear and said, “Captain Yuán. There’s major activity at the relay. Two Repositories, one Sovereign-class, one destroyer, just entered the system.”

Xiùlán replied, “On my way to the CIC, Specialist.”

Upon arriving, Yuán inspected the tactical map being displayed in place of the galaxy map. “Doesn’t appear you’ve identified our friends, Specialist.”

“Neither has responded to my hails, Captain.”

Yuán nodded as she touched her own comlink. “Asharru, please identify the Repositories that just entered the system.”

“Esiz’Qür. Iringù-Eßizkur. Additionally, Žiuk’Durmah and Normandy are standing by the Utopia relay to prevent the escape of any of the pirate ships that succeed in getting to the Vetus relay.”

Sà mǐ! … “Very well, Asharru. Please contact Iringù-Eßizkur … ask her to contact me on my private frequency.” Xiùlán strode to the port side hatch and took the stairs down to the war room. She had just taken a seat when the display well lit up with the projection of a Repository-Destroyer; the minor differences in appearance between this old machine and Asharru readily apparent to Xiùlán’s trained eyes.

“Yuán Xiùlán-Captain. It seems we are destined to fight together yet again.”

Xiùlán grinned at the image before her. “Iringù-Eßizkur. I did not expect you to join us here, but your presence is most welcome. May I assume your arrival … and that of Esiz’Qür, is to provide assistance in kicking the Blue Suns out of this system?”

“Affirmative, Captain.” Knowing our exchange was being recorded by the Hong Kong’s computer, I was employing subterfuge to conceal my presence inside the Repository; it was Irin’s image being displayed to Xiùlán, but it was my voice—being filtered through an electronic processor similar to the one I used when speaking as the Broker—to which Xiùlán was listening. I had quickly discovered I could sound exactly like Iringù-Eßizkur, including her musical
undertones, from inside the Broker’s research compartment; I only needed to speak evenly with a machine’s cadence to be convincing.

“If I may suggest, it might be wise to allow Asharru to employ his main weapon against the Vigilance, while Hong Kong stands ready as backup. Esiz’Qür will provide assistance to Elysium’s planetary defenses. The goal will be preventing any of the five Blue Suns corvettes from landing on the planet’s surface.”

“Your suggestion has merit, Iringù-Ešizkur. The Hong Kong will follow Asharru … we will standby with weapons ready.” Feeling much better about the possible outcome of their upcoming fight, Xiülán cut the connection, rose from her chair, left the war room and returned to the CIC.
Slaver Attack On Elysium

*Her mother told her she could grow up to be anything she wanted to be, so she grew up to become the strongest of the strong, the strangest of the strange, the wildest of the wild, the wolf leading wolves.* — Nikita Gill

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**Ai** – [愛 • love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)

**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’

**Qíngrén** – [情人 – lover]

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♦ INSIDE IRINGÜ-EßIZKUR, ON ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

The pirate ship’s main drive and weapons systems had been crippled by several well-placed shots during its ultimately unsuccessful attempt to elude the mobile planetary defense cannons orbiting the planet, forcing it to make a none too gentle belly landing at the spaceport. Having decided the Marines aboard the *Hong Kong* would be better suited to breaching *Dragon’s Greed*, Griff and I opted to remain within Iringù-Eßizkur and asked her to set down within view of the settlement’s colonial spaceport, but far enough away from the facility so as to appear harmless.

Video coverage of the ground-deployed Reapers during their final assault on Earth had featured many of the relatively less powerful Destroyer-class machines, so I was willing to bet that none of the locals, and certainly no one aboard *Dragon’s Greed*, were aware of the accuracy she possessed with her *face*–mounted, heavy-duty beam weapon. Standing at less than ten percent of the height—but possessing a numerical advantage of roughly 20-to-1 compared to the many Nazara class machines we had faced that day—Iringù-Eßizkur was more than capable of living up to her classification and, even at this distance, was anything but harmless.

The *Hong Kong* had followed *Dragon’s Greed* nearly down to the surface; coming to an eezo-core assisted slow orbit over the crippled corvette at an altitude of some 30 meters above the field, the frigate deployed a Marine squad in a UT-47a, which performed a combat landing beside the downed ship. As the shuttle lifted off for a return trip to the *Hong Kong*, the Marines boarded through the main airlock by blowing first the outer hatch, then the inner, thus insuring the vessel would not be returning to the airless vacuum of space. Successfully inside, they met virtually no resistance; every member of the small crew was injured, some seriously so. As soon as the squad leader confirmed that neither the crew nor the downed corvette was any threat to the *Hong Kong*, the frigate—still orbiting the field—sent the shuttle back down with an intelligence gathering team, led by a fully armed and armored Specialist Miranda Lawson.

Captain Yuán Xiùlán had offered to share some of the recovered data after their search of the light corvette was complete, but her call to Iringù-Eßizkur included some amazing information.

“Iringù-Eßizkur? I’m reasonably sure you didn’t leave my Qíngrén on the Citadel. Please … I really need to speak with her.”

Smiling in spite of myself, I took a seat in front of the comms terminal, relatively confident Xiùlán was by herself. “What can I do for you, Ai?”

“It's what we can do together, Sà mī. I have the identity of *Dragon’s Greed*’s captain … it’s
someone I’m sure you’ll recognize. Remember a squint by the name of Kryllê Ghydgryz?”

An expression of shocked surprise colored my response as I said, “What the bloody ’ell? … that’s an incredible discovery! So, what are you going to do with ’im? I hate to sound like a predator, Captain, but is it possible he still possesses any of that illegitimate 65 million credit payday from the sale of a stolen asari artifact?”

The throaty chuckle I received made my heart flutter in longing. “Haven’t had a chance to ask him, Ai… Med techs are treating his injuries—nothing really major, fortunately … all caused by the ship being tossed around by weapons fire from the orbital defense platforms—before we transfer him to the brig. I’ll have Sergeant Decker ask him a few questions after he’s locked down … see what he can shake loose.”

“Sounds good, Captain.” I paused, glancing at Buchanan as I thought about what I needed to say, and how I needed to say it. “Just a reminder, Ghydgryz getting paid for the sale of that figurine was completely against galactic law in general and asari law in particular. We busted our asses recovering that ugly little statue … a mission that would have been totally unnecessary if that four-eyed bastard hadn’t destroyed the Crystal Scarab.” Thinking back to that time in our lives, I glanced back over at Griff to find him watching me with a somber expression.

“So you have any thoughts about what we should do if we’re able to recover any of the credits the Suns paid Ghydgryz? Sixty-five-million doesn’t go very far these days, and he was paid eight years ago.”

“If he was smart, he’d have invested it. My bet is he bought a newer ship, outfitted it with lots of pirate goodies and crew, then went raiding in the Terminus … at least until the Reapers arrived. Pickin’s would have been rather thin during the war.” I cupped my chin for a moment, then said, “Xiülân, you need to go into that corvette … hack into Ghydgryz’s files. I need numbers … locations. If we can find his credits, galactic law permits confiscation for good cause.”

“Sà mǐ, nǐ yào wǒ rào guò liánmén de guīdìng ma? … [薩米，你要我繞過聯盟的規定嗎？ – Sami, do you want me to bypass the rules of the league (Alliance)?] she asked, amazement coloring her voice. “… and to what good cause are you referring?”

“Not sure what your first question was, Xiülân, but I need to ask you … do you remember K’ath Din’sari?”

Xiülân immediately replied, “How could I not? She was trying to make a better life for herself … got totally screwed by Ugrolya Rarfenak, after setting him up for a meet with the Blue Suns. Would have paid with her life if it hadn’t been for that STG agent … Paddok Wiks.”

“I’ve checked on her current situation, Xiülân. She’s still working as a waitress in Krieger’s Tavern … still living in that tiny apartment in the Echo Ward foundations on the Citadel. I would like to recruit her as an agent … a task that would be easier with some financial help.”

“I offered to share some of the info we recover from that ship, Ai … but as an Alliance Naval officer, my sharing any financial data of a personal nature that’s recovered from that ship would be violating every rule and regulation I swore to uphold. I cannot do that … not even for you, Sà mǐ! I am sorry.”

I looked down at the counter behind which I was sitting and sighed heavily. Returning my gaze to the eyes of my Inamorata, I attempted to keep the disappointment from coloring my voice as I answered her. “Understood, Captain Yuán. Even though the Alliance has declared the Blue Suns a terrorist organization, it was inappropriate for me to even ask such a thing of you. Please forgive
my thoughtlessness.”

Yuán smiled. “I can hear the disappointment in your voice, wǒ de ài. [我的愛 – my love] I know your capabilities, Sà mǐ … I have every confidence you’ll be able to track Captain Ghydgryz’s financial transactions back to just after his disappearance from Omega Station.”

“Having his account numbers and banking locations would be a huge help, Luv. It’ll take significantly longer for me to track those credits without that data, but I guarantee I will find that trail, no matter how cold it has grown.” After pausing for a moment, I added, “We’ll be leaving in a few hours, Captain … I want to be sure the Hong Kong and her crew make it back into orbit without any problems.”

“Thank you, Sà mǐ … I’ll contact you when we’re ready to depart.”

With a nod of affirmation, I terminated the connection, stood from my chair and turned to face Buchanan. “All of the crew on that ship, including Kryllê Ghydgryz, will be moved to the Hong Kong for transport back to the Citadel. Alliance will most likely have the Hong Kong finish what the orbital defense stations began … Marines will place some charges, destroy that ship where it crash-landed.” I paced about between the double row of terminals as I thought about my inability to intervene in the recovery of whatever credits that batarian pirate had managed to hang onto.

“She’s right, you know,” Griff offered softly. “You … we … are probably considered by the Alliance to be outlaws, probably just as much as the Blue Suns. You must realize she places her career in jeopardy every time she speaks with you, Sammy.”

I stopped pacing in order to study the grey-green eyes regarding me before admitting, “I know that, Griff. Damn Alliance rules and regs! Didn’t do either of us any favors after Cerberus infiltrated their top ranks and fucked our service records, did they.” Cupping an elbow in my left hand, I placed the knuckles of my fisted right hand under my chin as I thought about the problem. “If I could just get aboard that ship for thirty minutes…”

“Forget it, Sammy … I won’t let you risk your life that way!” Griff stood up and planted his fists on his hips as he waited for my reply.

“You think you can stop me without being seriously injured, possibly maimed? You know what I’m capable of doing, Griff. You really willing to risk it?”

“I do, Sammy … and I am willing to risk it, if it means keeping you safe. You’re not in Spec Ops anymore, so you’ll have to board that damned ship over my dead body, Samantha Traynor! There’s no one we can call to extricate your ass from whatever trouble will most certainly find you and grab onto both cheeks.”

I stared at the man in amazement for several long, uncomfortably silent moments before slowly stepping up in front of him, where I gently reached out to grasp his upper arms. “Griff, next to Xiūlán, you’re the most important person in my life now.” I pulled him down until his eyes were level with mine. “Thanks for keeping me focused … and for being my friend.” I squeezed his triceps, placed a kiss on a scarred cheek, then released him as I whispered, “Let’s use what we have learned about Ghydgryz … start looking for the credit trail that got him into the command chair of Dragon’s Greed.”

“Sounds good, Sammy.”

Several hours had quietly passed by the time I received another call from Xiūlán. “Sà mǐ, we’ve
got the crew of Dragon’s Greed locked in the cargo hold, and we’ve retrieved everything of any possible value to the Alliance from their data banks. We’ll be leaving in thirty.”

“What about the other corvettes up there, Luv? Or that cruiser?”

“Asharru disabled the Vigilance … took out their engineering and weapons control systems. They’re effectively dead in space, but in a stable orbit around Sidon. Alliance will send a cruiser here to retrieve the ship and crew. Esiz’Qür chased the other four corvettes through the relay … where he assisted Normandy and Žiuk’Durmah in stopping them from getting away.”

“I’ll just bet their captains are screaming bloody murder … it’s always the shits when the bad stuff you’re supposed to be doing to others happens to your own sorry ass.” I added with a smirk, “It’s really too damned bad for them there’s no one in the Alliance that will listen to their complaints.”

Xiùlán bared her teeth in a grin. “Oh, I’m sure there are a few people listening. Doing anything about it is another matter. The Suns are terrorists … their possession of those five warships, plus the Guardian—and their intent to use them for their slave trade—should be more than enough to convince most governments of that.”

“Agreed.” I wanted … needed … to say more but decided to wait. “We’ll stay on the ground until Hong Kong is back in orbit, Luv. When we do leave here, I may pay a visit to Grissom Academy … see how Major Alenko and Jack are getting along; and I never did hear if Kahlee Sanders ended her self-imposed exile and returned to the station.”

I saw Xiùlán’s eyes narrow in suspicion. “I can see the thought just as clearly as if you were telling me, Ai. I’m warning you, in no uncertain terms … stay clear of that ship. Dragon’s Greed is rigged; the demolition team just returned.”

It wasn’t a stretch for me to paint an indignant expression on my face; I sent Buchanan a warning glance and replied, “Really, Captain? That really wounds me … you actually think I have so little regard for my own well-being these days?”

Xiùlán appeared to be embarrassed at my question, which she chose not to answer. After several moments, she finally said, “Sà mǐ, nǐ de ài ràng wǒ de shēnhuó biàn dé wánzhěng. Wǒmen hén kuài jiù huitán.” [薩米，你的愛讓我的生活變得完整。我們很快就會談。– Sami, your love makes my life complete. We will talk soon.]

I didn’t even have to think about my reply: I poured every bit of the conviction I was feeling for her into my words. “ Méiyǒu nǐ de ài, wǒ de shēngming shì bù wánzhěng de, Xiùlán! Fēi ānquán! [沒有你的愛，我的生命是不完整的，秀蘭！飛安全！– Without your love, my life is incomplete, Xiulan! Fly safe!]

Nodding my head once, I cut the transmission, stood and moved around the partition to our lounge, where I watched the Hong Kong’s lazy orbit of the field. I could see that Xiùlán, despite my reply to her accusation, was making sure Dragon’s Greed would meet its end without interference from me or anyone else. Probably recording the entire process for Admiral Hackett.

A pair of gentle hands softly grasped my shoulders. “I know how bad you wanted in that ship, Sammy; I’m glad you chose not to go through me in order to get inside that damned thing.”

I placed my hands on top of his. “Griff, you’ve always had my back … it’s why I wanted you along for this ride.” We stood there, my back against his chest and my hands on top of his, watching and waiting for the charges placed by Hong Kong’s demo team to detonate; when it happened, it was really anti-climactic. The hull seemed to shudder from bow to stern; a few
sections were breached, followed by a bit of smoke that dissipated quickly in the cold air.

With a sigh, I turned to Griff and said, “That’s it, then. Port authorities will wait a few hours, then secure the drive core to prevent any eezo contamination of the area and haul the rest of the hull away to the scrap yard.” I moved to the internal comms terminal to speak with Iringû-Eßizkur. “Has Hong Kong reached orbit?”

Asharru reports the ship is now on its way to Sidon. Yuán-Captain intends to survey the Vigilance in order to insure the pirates are unable to repair the damages Asharru inflicted on the vessel. After a brief pause, she added, I am ready to leave the planet, Shadow Broker-Traynor.

I already had our next destination in mind. “Very well, Irin. Take us up to Grissom Academy.”

GRISsom ACADEMY, ORBITING ELySIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA

Iringû-Eßizkur had touched down on the approach/departure ramp from hanger bay Foxtrot-Two, located close to the station’s main operations center. Griff had decided to stay with Irin in order to research Kryllê Ghydgryz’s recent history while I deployed on the hover-bike, a conveyance whose appearance would be quite familiar to Major Alenko. Once I was inside the climate-controlled hanger, Irin grounded the small transport and dissolved the kinetic bubble within which I was riding, allowing me to step off the evil-looking machine and walk up to the station’s entrance hatch; it opened before I was within five meters to reveal a smiling Kaidan Alenko.

“Welcome, Ms Traynor. What brings you all the way here from the Citadel? … and riding around in a Repository?” Kaidan Alenko grasped both of my hands in an enthusiastic greeting; he was totally unprepared when I returned his greeting with a tight embrace.

Changing my position, I grasped both his arms as I said, “It’s really good to see you again, Major. And I should think you’d recognize that Repository … we spent some time transferring equipment inside from Liara T’Soni’s quarters while we were docked inside Žiuk’Durmah.”

Kaidan’s warm chuckle became a cheeky grin as he replied, “Damned things all look alike to me, Traynor. Nightmares from the black abyss.”

I grinned right back at him. “I need to speak with you concerning my conveyance.”

His happy expression of welcome gave way to a look of curiosity mixed with concern. “We don’t keep up with galactic news much these days; much too busy … virtually every waking minute, and most of the reporting is total rubbish.” After pausing for a moment, he asked, “Has something bad happened, Specialist?”

“Nothing bad, Major … though I will tell you I am no longer in the Alliance Navy, so you can simply refer to me by my name.” I gave his sassy grin right back as I concluded, “Can we go somewhere private? I have a lot of news to share with you, none of which I care to do publicly.”

I sipped fresh-brewed tea from the mug Alenko handed me as he remarked, “Somehow, I’m not surprised to learn you’re no longer in the Alliance Navy, Samantha. What does surprise me is your appearance. Your hair is longer than I remember, and that dark grey cloak, along with the armor and weapons underneath it … certainly not standard Alliance issue.”

“Captain Cody allowed me to keep my armor and take my weapons when I left the ship … well, he didn’t specifically say I could keep my weapons … they are Alliance issue, but were all
customized for me, so of no real use to anyone else. The armor and duster are all from my time in Spec Ops, and pretty much my standard form of dress anytime I’m ashore.”

“You still haven’t told me why you chose to resign from the Navy, Samantha.”

Rising from my chair, I activated my omnitool and used it to scan the office for listening or recording devices. Returning to stand in front of the major’s desk, I replied, “Please, call me Sammy … or Traynor, Sir. As to the reason for my resignation, it’s simple.” I returned to my chair, finished my mug of tea and spent the next thirty minutes telling the major all that had transpired since his transfer off the Normandy, beginning with my mission to assist Sandra Patton and Zaeed Massani in chasing down Vido Santiago, and ending with my resignation.

“As I said, my reasons were simple … and complicated, Major. Before I say any more, I need to have your solemn vow that what I’m about to tell you will not leave this office.” Adding, “It’s literally a matter of life and death, Sir … my life, and the life of my partner.”

Alenko’s eyes narrowed at my statement. “Samantha … Sammy … I swear on my honor as an Alliance officer that anything you say to me will be held in strictest confidence.”

I chuckled lightly at that. “Major, it’s been my experience that very few officers in the Alliance have any honor at all, but …” I paused a moment at his instant expression of unhappiness. “… that said, I always found you to be an exceedingly honorable officer … and a man of your word.” Looking down at my hands, I swallowed hard, then looked into the whiskey-brown eyes solemnly regarding me and said in a near-whisper, “I am the Shadow Broker, Major. It’s the reason I resigned from the Alliance.”

Kaidan immediately sat back in his chair to mutely contemplate me, as if I were some newly discovered form of alien intelligence … or had just crawled out from under a rock. After a lengthy, uncomfortable silence, he finally spoke. “I never would have guessed you would abandon your Naval career in order to become an info broker, Sammy, especially after your recent promotion. Who else knows about this?”

With a grim smile, I replied, “Spectre Shepard and Lady Liara, obviously; it was Liara who set me up – gave me access to the resources I needed. My Qìngrán aboard the Hong Kong, Captain Yuán; Captain Cody … he approved my resignation. Admiral Hackett. Irìngù-E Bízíkur still had all the equipment we transferred from the Normandy … all of which I’ve since upgraded.”

Alenko continued to regard me, amazement and worry vying for dominance in his expression. When he finally did speak again, it was to ask another question. “You mentioned a partner?”

I smiled at this. “Yes … I found my former Spec Ops teammate, persuaded him to partner with me … he’s inside Irìngù-E Bízíkur doing research as we speak.” Crossing my arms across my middle, I added, “Griffen Buchanan … he was seriously injured at the end of the war, during the final push in London. Alliance doctors couldn’t return him to a hundred percent, so rather than fly a desk, he took the medical discharge and monthly disability payment they offered. He was working on a salarian freighter when I found ’im.”

Kaidan nodded his understanding. “A lot of soldiers were crippled during the war – some terribly so.” Tilting his head slightly to the left, he asked in a soft voice that managed to convey concern. “So, does Mr Buchanan have feelings for you, Sammy?”

I had to really concentrate to keep my mouth from falling open. “Really, Major?” Shaking my head slightly, I tried to explain something I was no longer sure of myself. “Griff is my partner, and he loves me as if I were his sister, Mr Alenko … maybe more so. That’s as far as our personal
relationship goes … or has ever gone. He would never violate my trust in 'im that way.”

Even as I tried to explain, I knew I needed to sit Buchanan down and have a discussion with him, but that could wait. Right now, I needed a favor. “Major, if it’s not too much trouble, I would like to meet with Jack. I know she’s here – tracked her from Earth, shortly after you stopped in on Elysium to talk to Kahlee Sanders. I believe Sanders accompanied Jack up here from her ruined home on the planet’s surface.”

Kaidan’s look of surprise was followed by smirking admiration. “I guess you really must be the Shadow Broker if you’re aware of my visit … and Jack’s … to the Commander’s home on Elysium. And your information is accurate – Kahlee did accompany Jack up here from the planet.” He opened his omnitool, made several entries, then closed the tool as he stood and motioned for me to follow. “I’ll have Jack meet with you in a secure room down the passageway.”

I rose from my chair as I replied, “Thank you, Major. I really appreciate your help … and your discretion.”

The small meeting room was comfortably furnished with a trio of upholstered chairs and a couple of tables. Additionally, it had a viewport that looked out onto several of the close-by hanger ramps; of particular interest to me was the view it allowed of Iringù-Ebizkur, standing near the hanger bay door that had been my entry to the station. I could faintly hear some of the sounds being generated by construction equipment, probably a level below me; I hadn’t seen much of the station, but the small sections I had seen appeared to be in good repair. After scanning the room for listening devices, I returned to gaze out the viewport.

In less than five minutes, the entrance hatch—the reflection of which I could observe in the clear surface of the viewport—slid open to allow entry of the main reason I had wanted to visit this station.

Turning as she cautiously entered far enough for the panel to auto-close behind her, I waited for the woman to approach me a bit closer before saying, “Hello. I’m Samantha Traynor … but you may call me Sammy … or Traynor, if you prefer. How should I address you?”

The woman’s appearance appeared not to have changed much as I mentally compared her to a vid-still taken from the security footage I had hacked—her head was still mostly shaved to show the tattoos on the sides and back, with the short hair on top lengthening in the rear to form an insouciant ponytail. However, the black eye-liner and bright red lipstick that had previously served to harden her features had been changed; the colors were softer—muted, even—although the distinct scars in the skin about her neck remained.

The biggest change to her appearance was the clothing she now wore – the unfastened long-sleeve leather vest with the pair of cloth strips that crisscrossed from her neck down across her chest were gone, replaced by a short sleeve, open-neck blouse. A pair of regulation-cut trousers were tucked into a pair of heavy, knee-high boots equipped with thigh encircling, electronically-enhanced braces.

“Hello, Traynor … you can call me ‘Jack’ – simpler that way.” She walked up to me as she stuck out a hand, which I grasped and pumped twice. “Damn! You have some real strength in that arm, Traynor. I seem to recall you were some kind of specialist aboard the Normandy during the war. So, why are you here to see me?”

Motioning for her to sit in one of the chairs, I sat in the one closest and turned towards hers. “I was a comms specialist on the ship … stayed on ’er through end of the war.” I smiled at her as I
observed, “Compared to vid-stills I’ve seen of you from shortly after you joined Shepard on the _Normandy_ for the Collector campaign, you look really nice, Jack. Please excuse me for asking, but did the Alliance ask you to tone down the ‘biotic bitch look’ for your students?”

Stifling what I guessed was an impulse to smear me all over the walls and overhead, she gingerly took a seat as she responded with just a bit of heat, “Is that how you see me, Traynor?”

“Not at all, Jack … and I meant no offense. But, you have to admit your provocative dress and makeup during the war was meant to shock people.” Seeing her relax ever so slightly, I added, “I came up here to meet with you, Jack, because I have a proposition for you.” She did a good job of keeping her expression neutral, but I could see a subtle shifting in her posture. With a smile, I added, “It’s not what you think, Jack.”

“What do I think, then?”

“Relax, Jack … I’m only here to ask you to occasionally do some work for me.” At the sudden frown, I added, “Nothing too difficult for a woman of your talents; I’m an info broker … resigned from the Navy after an assignment went sideways … landed my ass in a hospital for a month.”

“Would that hospital stay have anything to do with a recent assault on the Blue Suns in Delta Ward?” she asked with a smirk. “It’s all ANN carried for three days after.”

It was my turn to look surprised. “Alenko told me there wasn’t time for watching the news up here … and I’m surprised to know ANN would report that kind of thing so extensively, Jack. What was the gist of their story, exactly?” After listening to her reply, I took the time to explain the rationale that had led to me and Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton breaking into and eliminating a bunch of batarian members of the group, spoke of an explosion I mostly could not remember, and told of Zaeed Massani’s capture of the Suns’ number one and number two on Susskind Station … something ANN had completely left out of their extensive coverage.

She ratcheted the smirk up several notches as she said, “I wasn’t aware the Alliance trained lowly comms techies to be stone-cold killers, Traynor. You really did all that?”

“I didn’t do that much, really,” I murmured. “Sandee’s a Marine. She did all the heavy-lifting … I was just along for the ride.”

“Uh-huh … save that modesty shit for someone that’ll believe you, Traynor.” With a shake of her head, she added, “I have to think that a fucking macho-assed dirt bag like Vido Santiago wasn’t told that a couple of non-biotics—a pair of women, at that!—plowed through his Citadel HQ like an entire squad of Marines.” Shifting in her chair, she crossed her arms over her chest and asked, “So, I can’t imagine the financial rewards of brokering information are that great … and yet, your attire … hell, your attitude … your confidence? It doesn’t speak of someone that’s living hand-to-mouth.”

“Jack, I need you to swear that you will keep what I’m about to tell you strictly to yourself.” I looked into her eyes, trying to determine if there was any subterfuge or dishonesty behind her hard stare. “If my identity were to ever go public, my ability to do the work I do would not only become impossible, my continued personal safety outside my secure residence would become incredibly difficult to maintain.”

Surprising me, she arose and moved to stand in front of me; I stood as well, facing her close enough to catch just the faintest hint of eezo as she gripped my upper arms. Speaking softly, she answered, “I’m sure you must have heard every wild-assed story there is about me, Traynor … Sammy.” She didn’t blink or look away as she added, “Anything you tell me, Sammy … anything!
… will be safe with me. I’d rather die than reveal a shared confidence. I swear it.”

I believed her. This wasn’t the same woman Shepard had rescued from the Blue Suns prison ship *Purgatory*; fighting the Collectors as part of Shepard’s team … leading her kids against all kinds of Reaper spawn after Shepard’s help in kicking Cerberus off this station … it had all changed her … molded her into a slightly more civilized adult. Taking the plunge, I whispered, “I am the Shadow Broker, Jack. My ride is just outside, parked on the hanger bay ramp.”

After taking the few steps to the viewport, I felt her arm brush mine as she quietly moved to stand beside me; her voice held a touch of awe as she quietly replied, “Helluva way to fly around the galaxy, Sammy.” Turning her head to look at me, she continued, “You must have kicked the previous Broker’s ass if you’ve taken over his whole operation.”

Returning her steady gaze, I replied, “Didn’t have to do more than ask for it, Jack. I’m the third Broker in the past several years … worked with the previous Broker for a time; that person assumed the position after eliminating the long-time predecessor in his ship orbiting Hagalaz.”

Looking back at Iringû-Èbizkur, I added, “I have a partner … former teammate from my Spec Ops time in the Alliance. He watches my six, steers me down a straight path when I attempt to stray.” I went silent as I thought of Buchanan … of just how much he meant to me as a friend.

“So, what are you proposing?”

“I’d like to employ you as an agent … someone I can trust to gather data for me, from this station and from Elysium.” Before she could turn me down, I added, “You’re not Alliance, Jack. You can certainly take care of yourself, and you have a degree of independence from oversight that will be advantageous.”

“I already have a full-time job, Traynor; it’s really rare for me to have any free time.”

Surprised that she hadn’t simply turned me down, I replied, “My needs won’t interfere with your job here … I only need you to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak. Anything out of the ordinary that you see or hear could be valuable info, Jack … and our arrangement will never be disclosed to anyone, not even Sanders or Alenko.”

“How will I communicate with you?” she asked. “Everything received or sent by this station is monitored, and recorded.”

“I’ll give you a secure comms device … something I built; it’s similar to the one I gave to my *Inamorata*, except it uses a different frequency. It auto-encrypts each message you enter prior to transmission, and the encryption key auto-changes after each message is sent. Any messages I send back are only decrypted after you enter your personal ID code. It transmits everything in a micro-burst, so transmission times are minimal, and,” I nodded towards the Repository outside, “it will only transmit to my own receiver inside Iringû-Èbizkur.”

Hoping to sweeten the offer, I had saved the best for last. “I’m not asking you to help me out of the goodness of your heart, Jack … you will most certainly be compensated for your time.”

She returned her gaze to Iringû-Èbizkur; her facial expression—reflected in the clear panel—made me think she was contemplating everything she’d just been told and my offer of part-time employment as an agent for the Shadow Broker. Turning back to face me, she said in a half-mocking tone, “You wouldn’t be shittin’ me, would you? You’re really the fucking Broker?”

“I wouldn’t travel all this way just to yank your chain, Jack.” I needed to do something that would convince her I was serious. “Tell you what … I’ll leave the device with you. You can think about
my offer … if you decide to accept, send me a message, and I’ll respond.”

Jack’s expression underwent a subtle change … from slightly mocking disbelief to thoughtful contemplation. She finally looked down at her arms as she once again crossed them over her chest. Turning away from me, she stepped slowly back towards the entry, there to stop, turn back to face me and say, “That’s really funny. No one’s ever offered to pay me for being a snoop.” With a heavy sigh, she said in a near whisper, “I don’t need to think about it, Sammy. I believe you’re being straight with me. Where’s this … device?”

With a smile, I activated my omnitool, its deep purple and ultraviolet glow casting strange shadows around the dimly lit room. “Hey, Griff. I need you to bring the package and meet me at the hanger entrance.” Closing the tool, I looked up to see Jack’s expression of disbelief.

“That’s a Serrice Council omnitool, ain’t it?” Her tone sounded accusatory. “Those fuckers cost a small fortune!”

“Given to me by Serrice Council, during my Spec Ops training on Luna. Keyed to my DNA, so totally worthless to anyone else, unless they need their hand amputated.” I walked up to the door, which slid into its recess at my approach. “Come on … let’s go to the hanger bay. I’ll tell you a bit about my training.”

After giving the transceiver and access codes to Jack, I accompanied Buchanan back into Iringù-Ebizkur, there to grab a snack and send a message to my Qíngrén aboard the Hong Kong.

When she answered the call, she first told me about their actions at Elysium. “We’re pretty much done dealing with the Blue Suns out here, Sà mǐ.” She looked down for a moment, as if reading from a datapad. “The Red Serpent tried to make a run for it as soon as they cleared the Utopia relay … big mistake. Noble Wyvern and Eva’s Smile capitulated after seeing that Cody meant business; Normandy blew the Serpent all to hell and damaged Dragon’s Avarice, probably beyond any hope of repair.”

“Sounds as if Normandy’s captain is dead serious about eliminating the Blue Suns from the galaxy.” I paused for a moment, then suggested it might be useful for an Alliance representative to pay the station a courtesy call and visit. “You would be able to give Admiral Hackett an unbiased report on the progress being made to return Grissom Academy to full functionality.” I added in a slightly snarky tone, “Want me to see if there’s private accommodations here for the two of us?”

Xiùlán’s reply was preceded by a throaty chuckle. “Let me make the request, Ai. A place to stay the night there just might be a bit more spacious for a ship’s captain than it would for a civilian.” Xiùlán smiled in an uncharacteristically wicked manner as she added, “When I speak with Major Alenko, should I also offer to have the ship’s communications specialist accompany me to, oh, I don’t know, inspect the deep space comms systems?”

Totally unaware of the mutual interest between Miranda Lawson and Kaidan Alenko, I replied, “That sounds like a good idea, actually. Shouldn’t be hard to convince the major to have an Alliance comms specialist inspect that gear.” Pausing a moment to think about Xiùlán’s proposal, I added, “Give Alenko a call … let ’im know you plan to stop over for a day.”

After another chuckle, she confided, “If Miranda comes ashore with me, she just may be sleeping in Alenko’s quarters.” Before I could gather my wits to comment on that little bit of information, she concluded with, “See you soon,” and cut the connection.

Shit! I guess even the Shadow Broker cannot possibly know everything!
Visiting Lovers

*Kiss someone who makes you feel their magic in your bones, who makes you wonder how can someone who looks like witchcraft at midnight taste so holy.* – Nikita Gill

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*Ai – [愛 - love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)*

*Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)*

*Qíngrén – [情人 – lover]*

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♦ GRISSOM ACADEMY · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦

Standing between Griffen Buchanan and Major Alenko, with Kahlée Sanders standing on Alenko’s other side, it was all I could do to contain my impatience as we waited for the *Hong Kong’s* shuttle to enter and settle on the deck of the transient hanger bay. Ostensibly, Xiùlán was visiting the station in order to see first-hand what progress had been made in repairing the damages inflicted by the Reapers … and by Ėrēberus before them.

That she was spending the night as a guest was the main reason I was so keyed up; fortunately, the only one that had noticed was Griff, who casually placed a calming arm behind me with his hand on my shoulder. Leaning in towards me, he whispered, “Calm down, Sammy. She’s almost here.”

Turning my head, I studied the caring grey-green eyes regarding me for a moment before responding with a whispered, “I’m trying, Griff … just seems like it’s been so damned long.” Returning my attention to the viewport, I watched as the UT-47a slowly pierced the kinetic barrier; with its fore and aft thrusters firing intermittently, it settled gracefully to within a few centimeters of the deck before the pilot cut the ventral thrusters to ground the ungainly craft.

Kaidan moved to the hanger bay pedestrian entrance, which he opened as the shuttle’s near-side split-hatch lifted and slid rearwards, allowing Captain Yuán, Specialist Lawson and their shuttle pilot to step out of the craft. Yuán approached Alenko with her right hand extended, saying, “Major … it’s good to see you again.” Without a hint of the snarkiness I expected, she added, “I’m sure you remember Specialist Miranda Lawson; and this is the *Hong Kong’s* co-pilot and navigator, Lieutenant Hall.”

Alenko took her hand and pumped it twice as he responded, “Welcome to Grissom Academy, Captain Yuán. You already know Mr Buchanan and Ms Traynor.” Indicating Sanders with his free hand, he added, “This is Staff Commander Kahlée Sanders … she’s in charge of the computer systems repairs and upgrades and station security.”

After introductions and greetings all around, Xiùlán and Miranda accompanied Alenko and Sanders for an abbreviated tour of the facility; Alenko explained the station was so large and damages done—first by Ėrēberus, then by the Reapers—had been so extensive, that only the central administrative core below the ‘tower’ and one of the four main wings extending from the central core had been repaired. The outer reaches of the so-called ‘north/south’ main wings containing additional classrooms and dormitory units were still ‘open’ to space, with the inner sections protected by kinetic barriers. The plan was for repairs to be extended outward, and only completed when they were able to employ more staff and enroll more students. For now, the repaired east wing contained all the necessities – private quarters for instructors and staff, student dormitories, classrooms, and food service areas.
While the major played tour guide, I had accompanied Buchanan back to Iringù-Eßizkur in order to assist his search into Kryllê Ghydgryz’s recent history. We both worked in silence for nearly two hours before Griff said, “Sammy, I want you to take a look at the file I just sent to your monitor … tell me what you see.”

I scrubbed through the displayed data concerning the batarian’s history over the previous five years; I had to skim through it twice before one line-item caught my eyes. Buried in the middle of a long list of mundane records was the account code and location for a deposit of 65 million credits. “Damn, Griff! You’re getting really good at this.” Seeing the deposit record, I had to ask, “Any records concerning withdrawals?”

“Oh, yeah. He was living large, Sammy … until he wasn’t. Made some really foolish gambling bets, got into some serious financial problems. Want to guess who his creditors were?”

“Blue Suns?”

“That’d be one of several. Unfortunately for Mr Ghydgryz, at one point he was into Aria T’Loak for several hundred thousand. Managed to buy his way out of that debt shortly before going to work for the Suns.”

I thought about this as I continued to look at the data Griff had discovered. “Aria T’Loak … definitely not someone to forgive a debt … ever! … no matter how seemingly inconsequential. That asari is involved in a lot of shady businesses, Griff.” I looked down for a moment before turning my attention to my partner. “While I was looking into her involvement in the legitimate sales of eezo, I discovered she’s been selling refugees into indentured servitude.”

“Now, if anything should be prohibited, that should. How does she get by with that?”

“A large number of people—humans, batarians, salarians—were displaced … made homeless … from the geth attacks on colony worlds such as Eden Prime, Noveria, and Virmire. When they turned up on Omega Station with only the clothes on their backs, Aria paid their debts by selling the able-bodied among them to mobile work details.” I used my right hand to scrub my face as I cupped that elbow in my left hand; leaning back in my chair, I added, “I believe a large percentage of the labor force that helped construct the Keelah Si’Yah was provided in this manner.”

“My God, Sammy, that’s simply … appalling. Do any of them ever walk free again?” After a brief pause, he added, “And the Keelah Si’Yah? Sounds quarian, but I never heard of that ship.”

I replied softly, “It is quarian—built as part of the Andromeda Initiative—it was the sixth cryopod vessel to leave for that galaxy, several months before the Reapers invaded ours.”

“I heard about that program; briefly thought about joining them.” With a firm shake of his head, he said, “But, setting out for a 600-year journey across dark space? Not my cup of tea.”

I smirked as I said, “Still time to catch ’em if you want, Griff. Just have to convince Žiuk’Durmah or Esiz’Qür to take you. Probably get you there before the first ship arrives, but you’d still have to sleep … if that’s the correct word for being in cryo … for over 500 years.”

“Not going to happen,” came the snarky reply. “You’re not getting rid of me that damned easily, Shadow Broker.” Returning to our previous discussion, he asked, “About those people … any of them able to buy their way out of their contracts?”

“They’re all low-paid, semi-skilled laborers, so damned few can manage to pay off their debt and pay for their room and board … but some manage it. Once they’re done with a job, they move on
Looking at Ghydgryz’s history with the Suns drew my thoughts back to K’ath Din’sari, the young batarian female that had been the go-between for his deal with the Suns. **Ugrolya Rarfénak royally fucked her after she provided the setup. Maybe he’s the creepy bastard I should be going after.** I heard Griff say something; lost in my thoughts as I was, I had to ask him to repeat his question.

“I asked if you had seen this report concerning Zaeed Massani.” Griff split his attention between me and the monitor in front of him, saying, “He left the Citadel shortly after you and Patton got out of the hospital. A couple of our agents reported seeing him in the Terminus Systems … based on his travels, they feel he’s looking for mid-level Blue Suns leaders in the Enoch System and on the planet Sanctum, in the Decoris system.”

That last location got my undivided attention. “Sanctum? Really? Early in the war, Alliance Intel learned of a Cerberus base—a research lab—on that freezin’ rock. Shepard and her squad took it down after a really intense fire fight … far as I know, the Illusive Man gave up on the lab, but the Suns had their own place not too far from there.” I thought about this for a few moments before saying, “Good work, Griff. Tag Sanctum as a place we need to monitor. If Zaeed is interested, I expect the Suns returned there in force immediately after the announcement of Jack Harper’s death.”

Griff replied with a grim smile, “Consider it monitored, Sammy,” as he made several entries in our joint database.

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Major Alenko had invited Griff and myself to the officer’s mess for a quiet dinner; it gave me the perfect excuse to once again wear my China blue and red plum shift dress and calf-hugging over-the-knee black suede boots that had so impressed Xiùlán when we had dinner on the Citadel.

The major had arranged for us to be seated in a manner that would facilitate intimate discourse; my qīngrén was seated on my left, with Griff on my other side. While it was true that I’d have preferred to have had dinner alone with Xiùlán, I was glad for the opportunity to listen in on the conversations taking place around me as we enjoyed our dinners. Kahlee Sanders sat at the end of the table, with Griff on her left side and Major Alenko, seated next to Miranda, to her right. Jack rounded out our little group; she was seated at the end of the table opposite Kahlee.

It was obvious to me that Buchanan was enamored with Kahlee Sanders from the moment they were introduced; while she was about my equal in height and build, the woman’s pale blue eyes and naturally blond hair were an unusually rare addition to her genuine beauty. During the main dinner course, I could just overhear Griff, sharing a bit of his own derring-do while involved in the Spec Ops program. Kahlee seemed to be reciprocating with some of her pre-Sovereign history, when then Lieutenant David Anderson and Saren Arterius rescued her from a krogan bounty hunter. They each spoke about batarians and seemed to be comparing notes concerning their mutual dislike of them as a race.

It was a bit more difficult for me to eavesdrop on Alenko and Miranda. While Alenko looked rather serious in his dress uniform, Miranda was a vision in a sleeveless red dress trimmed in black, enough so that I asked Xiùlán if she thought I’d look good similarly dressed.

“She wore that little number first time Kaidan took her to dinner on the Citadel … right after she joined the Navy. Wound up spending the night in his apartment.” Xiùlán grinned at me for a moment before responding to my question. “And no, I don’t think it would look as good on you … or me. It’s really not your color, and I’m too tall and sinewy to properly fill it out.”
As I thought about her opinion, I continued eating, and was thinking about a second glass of wine while finishing my salad when Xiùlán whispered in my ear, “The major has reserved a stateroom for me tonight. There’s more than enough room for you to stay with me, but only if you’re so inclined.”

I flashed her a naughty grin as I responded, “Oh, I’m definitely inclined, Ai … I just hope you’re ready for a virtually sleepless night … ’cause I’ve been saving up for this!”

After a quick glance at Miranda and Kaidan, I added, “Think she’ll be worth a damn tomorrow when you depart for home?”

“I believe Miranda has been saving up for tonight as well, Sà mǐ,” came the grinning rejoinder. “She may not get as much sleep as she’d like, but I guarantee she will be stone cold sober.”

“Do you think she’s in love with the major?”

Xiùlán placed a bit of the rice that was part of her main dish in her mouth and chewed for a moment before taking a sip from her wine glass; she then whispered her reply. “I don’t think she’s been involved with him long enough to have achieved that emotion, Sà mǐ. She likes him … quite well, actually, but love? I seriously doubt that’s happened yet.”

Miranda and Jack—in between eating their dinners—were also bonding, but in a different way. Jack quietly offered an apology to Miri for having threatened to biotically smear her all over the bulkheads in her quarters on the Normandy; Miranda apologized for Jack’s childhood suffering at the hands of Cerberus, even though she herself had been a child at the time.

Alenko took note of this, saying to both, “It’s wonderful that each of you have moved past your mutual dislike for each other. Forgiveness is something I wish the galaxy could embrace … life in general could be so much better.”

At that, I placed my left hand, unseen, on an inner thigh while looking meaningfully at my qíngrén; I was remembering that awful time on Arcturus Station—before the Reaper invasion—after my angry conversation with Xiùlán during her deployment on the Tokyo. A pair of liquid, sable-brown eyes solemnly returned my gaze with an intensity that instantly caused my own eyes to start swimming; a warm palm and fingers lovingly covered my hand as she leaned towards me and breathed, “Sà mǐ, wǒ yǒngyuàn shūyú nǐ. [薩米，我永遠屬於你。– I am yours forever, Sami.]

It took an enormous amount of self-control to keep from breaking down at her expression of undying love for me; swallowing hard, I managed to find my voice in order to softly reply, “Wǒ quánxìnquányì dì ài nǐ, Xiùlán. [我全心全意地愛你，秀蘭。– I love you with all my heart, Xiùlán.]”

Major Alenko, being seated across from me, had heard our whispering and smiled as he glanced at each of us. “Captain, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen Ms Traynor so happy … it seems a shame she wasn’t able to transfer to the Hong Kong.”

Xiùlán responded with a small grin as she replied, “Sammy is exactly where her training and talents can be of the greatest benefit to the Alliance, Major … and the galaxy.” With a loving look directed at me, she added, “It actually would have been counter-productive for her to be assigned to my ship … her presence on board would make it difficult for either of us to focus on our jobs.”

Alenko nodded in seeming understanding, although I don’t believe he truly had any idea of the depth of our love for each other. I totally agreed with Xiùlán’s assessment … she really didn’t need a problem like me on the Hong Kong.
Muted conversations continued around the table as after-dinner drinks were served. I thought Buchanan’s grin would split his face when he was told Elasa was available – he had developed a taste for the asari beverage during Yuán’s hospital stay after our mission on Cartagena Station. I recalled it as his beverage of choice the night we went to The Smiling Tiger Tavern in Vancouver, after Alliance Command had allowed the Cerberus sponsored sabotage of the turian transport MSV Anixara to proceed as planned. Griff noticed my solemn demeanor as he turned towards me with his glass raised. “To what should we drink tonight, Sammy?”

I forced myself to smile as I lifted my own glass of Serrice Ice Brandy and paraphrased what I’d said to him back then. “Friendship, having each other’s backs … and continuing to live in spite of everything that’s happened in our lives!” I touched the rim of my glass to his, then took a sip of the fine brandy; he mirrored my action, with the exception of taking a couple of swallows of the pale green beverage.

I continued to quietly sip my brandy as I studied the faces of first Jack, then Miranda and Alenko. Even though he was having to share her with Jack, Kaidan was thoroughly enjoying Miranda’s company, all while she chatted away with the tattooed biotic as if she was a long-lost sister; I attributed this to the short-term effects of the alcohol imbibed by each of them, although I knew that Jack’s Cerberus enhanced biotics abilities quickly negated any lingering effects of over-indulgence in alcoholic beverages. Must be handy to have no worries about a morning-after hangover.

Griff and Kay, seemingly having hit it off from the first moments of their introduction, appeared to be having a wonderful time, speaking about their experiences during the war as they were eating and drinking. Watching and listening to them share their pre-war and wartime experiences, I was thrilled that Griff had met someone with whom he could share his escapades.

Finishing my drink, I excused myself as I slid my chair back and stood. “Major, I really enjoyed having dinner here tonight; I’m going back to Iringù-Eßizkur in order to grab a couple of items I forgot to bring ashore, then turn in for the night.”

What I didn’t reveal was that I also planned to check my info-feeds in order to be sure nothing required the immediate attention of the Shadow Broker. I placed a hand on Griff’s shoulder as he began to rise. “No need for you to go with me, Griff. Stay and enjoy yourself.” I nodded towards Alenko, who had partially risen as I stood, glanced meaningfully at Xiùlán, then left the dining area for the hanger bay where Irin’s hover-cycle was parked.

Miranda had strolled hand-in-hand with Kaidan through a rather long passageway; she was totally amazed when he led her through a doorway into the atrium, a vast, park-like area laid out on several levels, with grass, shrubs and a rather large lake.

“It’s unfortunate we cannot spare more than minimum resources to bring this area back to its former glory … at least, not yet. We’ve occasionally worked to clear some of the debris, but damages caused by Cerberus troops during their attempt to kidnap our biotics students are quite extensive.” She looked about as he pointed out some of the places where weapons fire had fractured stonework and shredded some of the larger plants.

“It must have been beautiful, Kaidan … reminds me somewhat of the Presidium on the Citadel.”

“The designers took a lot of their cues from that place—not to recreate it, really—more to pay homage to it. It was a way for people that had grown used to the Presidium to feel more at home out here over Elysium.”
She looked about as they sat on a bench on the upper promenade. The impacts of the massive firefight with the enemy were many – some less subtle than others. “I’d like to visit again, once this has all been repaired and refurbished.”

Alenko chuckled at that. “Once we’ve completed repairs to the main classrooms and living areas on the north end, we’ll have the capacity for many more people to live here. I don’t expect the atrium will be so peaceful, and deserted, as it is right now.” Standing, he held out a hand for Miranda. As she took his hand and rose from the bench, he encircled her waist with his arms, drew her close and said, “I know it’s been a while, Miri. Just wondering if …”

“Shut up and kiss me, Major.” The instant shock in the whiskey-colored eyes gave way to amused understanding as he met her lips with his own. She relished the taste of his mouth as she savored the slowly building desire in her core and ended the kiss by gently grasping his lower lip in her teeth and sucking on it like a sweet, tasty morsel before releasing it with a moist pop. With an innocent smile, she said, “Walk me back to my quarters, Major?”

Alenko grinned as he turned her partway in his arms, slid a hand down her back—there to slide along the upper swell of her butt until he could grasp her waist at the hip—and began walking towards the hatch they’d used to enter the atrium. Miranda had an arm behind Kaidan, where she employed her thumb to hook the waistband of his slacks in order to keep him pulled as close to her as possible.

They strolled in companionable silence until they reached the door to her guest quarters. Miranda retrieved her arm and waved her omnitool through the red glow of the haptic lock. As it cross-faded to green and the door slid aside, she turned towards her companion. With a quick peck on his cheek, she whispered, “You know, it’s not that late, Major, and we haven’t seen each other for quite some time. I would really like to visit you in your quarters for just a bit.”

Alenko didn’t have to think about his reply. “Of course, Miranda. That would be wonderful.”

With a devilish grin, she said, “Great! Just let me grab my shoulder bag.”

Xiùlán met me in the airlock as I returned astride Iringù-Eßizkur’s malevolent looking hover-bike. I had checked my numerous info-feeds for anything demanding the immediate attention of the Shadow Broker; having seen nothing that could not wait until the morning, I walked up to my Inamorata with a cheeky grin. “I’m yours for the evening, my darling.”

A cool hand grasped mine as she turned towards the nearby residential section; I heard a promise, half-whispered in the stillness. “An evening isn’t nearly long enough for what I have planned for you, Sà mǐ.” She smirked as she added, “Although, it won’t be quite the challenge it could have been, given that you’ve worn that dress and boots before.”

It could have been the alcohol I’d consumed that made me giggle. “I’m sure I do not know what you’re speaking about, Captain.” I adopted my best ‘innocent me’ face as I half-turned towards her and said, “You almost make it sound like you believe me to be a loose woman.”

“‘Loose woman’ is the last thing that comes to mind when I think about you, Sà mǐ … and I meant what I said to Alenko at dinner – having you on the Hong Kong would make it nearly impossible for me to focus on my job … not to mention the regs concerning fraternization.”

“Guess it’s a good thing I’m no longer in the Navy, Ai. Wouldn’t want you to get in trouble for bedding the likes of me.”
I had said it jokingly, but Xiùlán paused and turned towards me. “Sà mǐ, don’t … not even in jest. The moment General Park endorsed my promotion, we were in violation of regs. I don’t know why the General, Admiral Hackett and Captain Cody all looked the other way … was it because we were already in a relationship? … maybe out of respect for our previous achievements? No matter now … and others would not have been so tolerant of our breach.” With a slight huff of exasperation, she added, “I have never regretted nor been ashamed of falling in love with you, Sà mǐ … never! Your love is the best thing that ever happened to me!”

“I’m sorry, Xiùlán … I didn’t mean it like that; after all this time, I would like to think you know me better. And why are we even talking about this?”

We had been walking the entire time we were talking; coming to a halt outside her guest quarters, she keyed the hatch with her omnitool and ushered me inside. Picking up where she left off, she said, “Your comment about no longer being in the Navy is why we’re discussing this, Ai.” Facing me, she took my hands and solemnly said, “When you resigned your commission, I actually felt as if you were leaving me behind as well.”

“Oh, Xiùlán … I couldn’t … damn it to hell, I would never do that to you … not after breaking your heart on Arcturus Station. You own me, darling, body and soul. I would do anything for you … anything! Don’t you ever doubt that … and never, ever hesitate to ask!” I brought my arms around her back as I applied my lips in an attempt to hungrily devour her mouth.

Her surprise at my sudden attack quickly turned to eager acceptance as she used her tongue to compete with mine for dominance. Our breathing became labored to the point we had to break apart; our noses were not capable of delivering the oxygen needed to keep our brains conscious while we kissed. “Come on, then,” she whispered in a coquettish tone. “We may as well try out the bed.”

Alenko poured a splash of whiskey each into a pair of tumblers; taking a sip from his own glass, he reached out to hand the other glass to Miranda as she walked up to the small counter. “It’s sipping whisky, Miri … TM88 Peruvian, to be precise.”

Lawson wrinkled her nose as she sipped some of the fiery, caramel-colored liquid. “Oof,” she murmured. “This stuff is not for the weak, Major.” Taking another sip, she closed her eyes and tried to breathe as the liquid burned its way down to her stomach. “Damn! That is some seriously good shit!” Setting her glass on the counter, she looked at Kaidan from under her eyebrows and asked, “So, what are your intentions tonight, Major?” As he put his glass to his lips, she asked, “Would you like for me to spend the night with you?”

Alenko nearly choked on his whiskey at her bold question. After recovering from the coughing fit brought on by carelessly swallowing the pungent liquid, he fixed her with a hard stare and said, “Only if that’s your desire, Miri.” Taking a quick glance at the couch behind her, he added, “But if you do choose to stay, I’ll tell you now that I don’t intend to cede my bed to you; I hope you’re ready for company.”

Miranda slowly moved around the counter to come up against Kaidan, who turned to meet her advance; she responded by wrapping her arms around his back and pulling him in tight. “It’s been a long time since I’ve made love to a man, Kaidan.” Tilting her head slightly, she breathed, “I want you, Major,” then slowly, thoroughly kissed him. After what felt like a lifetime to Alenko, she unhurriedly pulled away and said, “I know you’re afraid you might break me, Kaidan, but I’m not a porcelain figurine. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a flesh and blood human female.” With the beginnings of a snarky grin, she added with a tiny giggle, “Well now, I do believe you have noticed that fact after all.”
She ground her pelvis against the swelling member pressed hard against her and added, “I think we need to get undressed, Kaidan, while I still possess the patience to keep from ripping your clothes off.” Releasing him, she grabbed her glass, downed the remainder of the liquid and set it down with a loud clunk, then turned and sauntered towards the bedroom, making sure to maximize the seductive sway of her hips. Kaidan watched for a moment as if mesmerized, then quickly followed her into the room.

Miranda had paused within a couple of steps of the bed; with her back to him, she looked over her shoulder to ask, “If you would be so kind?”

With a start, Kaidan realized she was requesting help with her zipper. Placing his hands on her shoulders, he nuzzled the side of her neck. “Forgive me … I’m totally out of practice.”

She kissed the hand on her right shoulder before answering. “There’s nothing to forgive, Kaidan … I haven’t had any practice at this for a number of years, and we have all night to learn as much as we can about each other. We’ll just take things slow.”

With a small chuckle, he unfastened the small hook from the matching eye above the closure, then gripped the top edge of her dress with one hand while using his other to slowly lower the zipper. “Seems I helped you with this dress once before … on the Citadel. He inhaled in rapt awe as he caught sight of the flawless, bare skin above and below the back band of her bra. She turned to face him as she pulled the dress away from her chest; drawing her arms from within the sleeves, she eased the bodice down to her waist, then bent slightly as she lowered the garment down her legs, stepped out of it and stood back up. Placing a hand on her hipbone, she cocked back on that leg to proudly display her body—now clad only in a low-cut black bra, a pair of ‘barely there’ black panties, and high heels—to an appreciative man.

Glancing down at her nearly nude torso, she grinned at Kaidan’s wide-eyed stare. “I’d have to say, Major … it appears you approve of how I look in only my underwear.” Turning, she stepped over to the closet, hung her dress within, then removed her shoes before stepping back to the bed; taking a seat, she crossed one leg over the other and looked at him through her lashes. Gripping the edge of the mattress with her hands beside her thighs, she whispered, “Your turn, Alenko … time for me to see just how much you approve of what I’ve revealed to you.”

Kaidan jumped slightly. “Here I thought I would be leading you tonight, Specialist.” He began releasing fasteners on his jacket as he spoke; after hanging it in the closet, he pulled his boots and socks off before unfastening and removing his dress trousers. Hanging them with his jacket, he turned to face her while removing his dress shirt; after pulling his undershirt off over his head, he tossed both garments into the corner, then placed his hands on his own hips and waited.

Miranda stood up; taking a step forward, she used her palms to cover his nipples. “You are put together quite well, Major.” She slowly slid her hands down, moving them apart as they descended, until they rested on his hips; she used her improvised handholds to pull him to her, pressing her bosom gently against his well-developed pecs. Tilting her head, she reached in and caressed his lips in a soft, lustful kiss; this caused the object of her desire to stiffen further in warm anticipation.

Alenko broke the kiss and quickly nuzzled her neck, took a quick breath of air and as quickly blew it out across the smooth expanse of the lightly scented skin where her neck met her shoulder and back. “Dammit, Miranda … I have never wanted anyone the way I want you right now.” Moving carefully, he slid both hands up between them until he could palm her breasts through the cups of her bra.

A sensual whisper, accompanied by intermittent little nibbles on his earlobe, warmed his cheek
enough to make him flush in heated anticipation. “Far be it for me … a mere Navy chief warrant officer … to tell you … a Marine major … how to proceed, but … wouldn’t you rather feel bare skin under those hands?” She continued to nibble as she added in a seemingly shy breath, “I can promise you I would enjoy those hands so much more if they could caress my breasts without any interference.”

If Kaidan was surprised by this revelation, he gave no indication as he used the garment to guide his hands around her ribcage until they met in the center of her back; he nearly embarrassed himself, fumbling slightly with the hook and eye closures. With these released, he slowly slid each strap off her shoulders; in turn, Miranda gracefully pulled her arms one at a time up and out of the loops.

Backing a step away from him, she slowly lowered the cups to reveal a pair of aroused nipples. Tossing the bra onto the nearby dresser, she once again closed the distance between them, saying, “Well? What do you think?”

Kaidan gently cupped each of Miri’s breasts in his hands and softly thumbed a pair of needy buds. “You are beautiful, Miranda, exquisitely so … and saying so doesn’t even begin to do you justice.”

With a smirk, she leaned into his hands slightly, brushed his lips with hers and breathed, “Come on. Let’s see how well we fit together in that bed.”

Kaidan pulled Miranda along as he turned and backed up two steps to sit on the edge of the bed; with her navel at eye level, he used a finger on each hand to hook the waistband of her panties. Placing a kiss on her taught belly, he pulled them down past her hips until—with a shimmy of her thighs—the flimsy fabric could free-fall down her legs and puddle at her feet. Without hesitation, he buried his nose and mouth in the neatly trimmed thatch of curly hair guarding her warm center, there to inhale her scent and place a kiss of promise.

Raw heat flooded Miranda’s core; she could feel a touch of anticipatory slickness forming as she shuddered, nearly coming undone at the proximity of his mouth to her mons. Reaching down, she used the palms of her hands against his upper arms to encourage him to stand; once he was on his feet, she crouched in front of him and relieved him of his skivvies. He gasped as cool fingers encircled the length of his fully erect member; it was all he could do to restrain himself from climaxing right then.

She rose to follow as he sat, then reclined on the bed; he reached up to encourage her to lie down beside him. The cool fingers, having been somewhat warmed from grasping his organ, found their target again, but instead of lying beside him, she threw a leg across him to squat astride his hips, then deftly guided him into the entrance of her wet heat; after moving her hips back and forth slightly to get settled, she gasped as he slid fully inside her. Bending over at the waist, she locked her mouth over his and slid her tongue deep between his lips as she settled her pelvis into a slow, grinding rhythm. Kaidan palmed Miri’s ample breasts as he attempted to keep himself in check. It had been so damned long—before the Reaper War … before the Collectors—since he had been with a woman. She seemed to know exactly what she was doing … using the slick tightness of her throbbing core to stroke his hardened shaft up to the ragged edge of climax. He tensed a little when she lifted her torso slightly and panted, “Tell me what you’re feeling …”

It took only a moment for him to understand … she abruptly straightened up and threw her head back. With a guttural growl, she climaxed; Kaidan was sure he could feel the rhythmic pulse of biotics enhancing the muscular contractions of her vaginal walls. Without any conscious thought, his own hips bucked in sweet release as he attempted to bury every centimeter of himself inside her; seconds seemed like minutes as he ejaculated in seemingly endless contractions.
When he finally collapsed underneath her, she leaned down, placed her lips on his in a soft kiss, then panted in a hoarse whisper, “That … was the fucking! best! sex! ever!”

“Agreed.” Kaidan would not argue with her assessment; feeling his erection slowly subsiding, he noted with some surprise that he wasn’t sliding out of her as he expected … not that he would complain about it. Still, he had to ask. “Um, Miri … are you … holding on to me?”

With a tiny giggle, she carefully eased her bottom up from his pelvis, then cupped a hand against her wet entrance as she swung a leg across him. Cautiously getting off the bed, she continued to grin as she walked to the bathroom. After several minutes, Kaidan faintly heard her as she turned the water on in the shower. “Care to join me? I’ll let you wash my back.”

Miranda snuggled her nude body against Kaidan’s equally bare anatomy; using a thumb, she teased one of his nipples erect, just to see if she could. A hand sleepily grabbed hers as a whispered protest fluttered the hair on top of her head. “You must realize that what you’re doing has a similar effect further down.”

With a disbelieving giggle, she slipped her other hand down past his navel to discover a slowly growing erection. “Damn, Kaidan! I didn’t realize how easy it is to arouse you.” In a tone suggesting apologetic embarrassment, she asked, “Didn’t I already satisfy you tonight?”

The chuckle she received provided the answer to her query. “Miranda, I can honestly say that having sex with you just one time makes the few other times I’ve been with a woman pale in comparison.” After a brief pause, he added, “Now, that hand on my package leads me to wonder if you are looking for an encore performance.”

Raising her head from his shoulder, she leveled steel-blue eyes at whiskey-browns for a moment before reaching in to plant her lips on his mouth. Gently gripping, then releasing his lower lip with her teeth as she withdrew, she continued to slide her fingers back and forth along his length as she said, “We’re both still nude, Alenko … and I’m not sleepy just yet.” Releasing him, she brought her arm up to snake over his chest and under his arm. Hand slightly under his back, she pulled him towards her until he was partially on top of her.

With a husky whisper of, “Take me, Kaidan,” she moved her free leg away, giving him the space to roll the rest of the way on top of her; she then reached down between their bodies to guide him once more into her moist center.

Kahlee Sanders had spent the evening after dinner with Griffen Buchanan; she had taken him on a short tour – similar to the tour Alenko had given Miranda – before settling into one of several lounges to share in quiet conversation and drinks. She had done most of the talking – mostly about her past, before the Reapers, the Collectors, and Sovereign – not realizing that Buchanan had a rare gift for remembering the most innocuous of details. In turn, he had shared a little bit of his own history in the Alliance before the war.

Returning from a trip to the powder room, she took note of a chrono and gasped at the lateness of the hour. Retaking her seat across from Griff … as he insisted she refer to him … she picked up her nearly empty glass, drained the contents in one swallow, the set it back on the table while saying, “I have really enjoyed spending the evening with you, but it’s quite late, Griff. Would you be terribly offended if I retired for the evening?”

Buchanan glanced at the chrono mounted over the door with a start. “Damn! I had no idea it was so late! My apologies for keeping you out into the wee hours, Kay.” Griff stood from his chair
and reached down, where he gently took Sanders’ hand and assisted her to her feet. “Do you need me to walk with you back to your quarters?”

Sanders showed her teeth in a wide grin. “If we were on Omega, or even on the Citadel, I’d certainly say yes, but here? … on this station? I appreciate the offer, Griff, but you’re a visitor … I don’t expect you know your way around this place. Should I accompany you back to your guest quarters? Or will you be staying aboard that evil-looking machine?”

“You may accompany me to my quarters, Ma’am. Captain Yuán and Specialist Lawson are the Major’s guests tonight, and I believe that Sammy is spending her evening with the captain.” Griff chuckled lightly, then added, “I’ve actually grown accustomed to living inside a former Reaper … plenty of room inside, even for someone my size. Still, it will be nice to sleep ashore for a change. Not many opportunities these days.”

Kahlee smiled, waved a hand to indicate the way down the passageway while covering a sudden yawn with the other and said, “Let’s be off, then. 0700 will be upon me before I know it.”

Griff studied her pale blue eyes as he replied, “For me as well, Kay … for me as well.”
back to work

ghosts of the person you used to be are so proud of who you are, they live on inside you applauding you for living on despite your scars. — nikita gill, wild embers

ai – [愛 - love] (whether voiced by xiùlán or samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)
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-ebízkur’
míngbái wǒ – [明白我 – understand me] usually put forth as a question, as in ‘do you understand me?’
qíngfū – [情夫 – lover]
qíngrén – [情人 – lover]

♦ griSSom acaDeMy · veTuS syStem, PeTrA neBuLa ♦

i stood transfixed in the doorway between the bathroom and bedroom of my qíngrén’s guest suite, simply enjoying the view of a still sleeping—and very nude—yuán xiùlán. as i studied the greens and golds of the very large dragon tattoo peeking out from under the sheet lying diagonally across her muscled back and shoulders, it dawned on me that, after all this time, i still could not look at her sleeping form without feeling a nearly overwhelming sense of yearning … bordering on pain … in the center of my chest.

eyes brimming with moisture, i forced myself to move fully into the room, where i gingerly grasped the upper edge of the sheet and gently folded it down to reveal an exceptionally firm butt at the top of an amazingly toned pair of legs. my careful observation of xiùlán’s face was rewarded as a pair of firmly pressed together lips increasingly frowned; this frown was quickly followed by a hand, blindly reaching out to reclaim her sheet.

failing in the attempt, slanted eyelids covering a pair of sleepy, sable-brown eyes slipped open just enough for the slumbering woman to view the reason for her suddenly bare … and cold … posterior. “what the ‘ell, sà mǐ?” she croaked. “it cannot possibly be time to be awake.”

leaning over her, i gently buried my fingers in the cleft of her arse to grab the butt cheek closest to me. this brought a smile to her face, crinkling the skin beside her eyes. “as much as i hate to admit it, the time is 0705, ai.” i slid my free hand under her torso to fondle a breast, causing her to gasp in surprise.

“dammit, sà mǐ! you keep pushing my buttons like that, i cannot be held responsible for my …”

her protest faded to silence as i kneeled beside her and placed my mouth over hers in a passionate kiss. pulling back slightly to catch my breath, i whispered, “warning received and understood, my darling.” i relocated the hand i was using to hang onto her ass, sliding it across the smooth, taut curve to end up on a prominent hipbone, where i pulled and shoved lightly, rolling her up on her side. i followed quickly, stretching out full length against her with a thigh pressed in between her legs. “this is probably the last time we’ll be physically together until you’re able to take some time off, luv.” by this time, my groin was seemingly on fire, even as i felt a bit of moisture slicking my inner thighs. “i don’t intend to waste a single minute of our together time! i need you to make love to me, xiùlán … right now!”
An arm came up and over me to pull me in closer; I melted into her embrace as she breathed, “I am yours, Sà mǐ.” Xiùlán wrapped me up in her arms and held on tightly as she used her scarred left thigh to pleasure me; I must have been on the ragged edge when I climbed into bed with her, so was totally unprepared for the intensity of my release. I yelped in surprise as my entire body shuddered from the intense, multiple waves of ecstasy churning through me.

As my body finally relaxed, I became aware that Xiùlán was panting as if she had just sprinted a hundred meters. I cupped her face in both hands and planted a soft kiss on her lightly freckled nose. “Damn, Luv! Soon as I think we’ve gone over the top, I get surprised. I truly believe we will never reach that pinnacle again, but hell … just gives us both something to shoot for next time, right?” Before she could answer, I tentatively touched my lips to the lush sweetness of my Inamorata’s mouth, then eased away to gaze into the inky pools of her eyes.

“Sà mǐ, měi cì wǒmen zuò’ài, wǒ dū hěn kāixīn! [薩米，每次我們做愛，我都很開心！– Sami, every time we make love, I am very happy!] That we have to be apart so many weeks and months at a time just makes what we do when we’re together that much sweeter. There are no words … in Mandarin, or Galactic … that adequately describe how much your love means to me, darling, but you need to know …” Xiùlán’s voice hitched slightly and her eyes clouded with moisture; with a bit of effort, she swallowed, but her voice was still squeaky as she concluded, “I would do anything for you, Sà mǐ … if I had to die to keep you safe … to keep you alive, I would not hesitate to do so.”

As always, hearing her declare her love for me … in that way … made my heart ache; I couldn’t help but respond in a similar manner. “Xiùlán, I don’t intend for you to ever need to go that far for me. I can’t imagine a future for me that doesn’t include you in it, míngbái wǒ? You dying to keep me alive? … that would absolutely be the death of me, my love.” Holding her close, I poured every bit of my love into the kiss I gave her. Pulling back, I breathed, “Xiùlán, wǒ de shēngmìng shǔyú nǐ. [秀蘭，我的生命屬於你 – Xiùlán, my life belongs to you.]

Groaning in mixed desire and frustration, she squeezed me tight as she returned my kiss, then let go and slid off the bed to stand beside me, there to place her body fully on display for me. “I have to shower and get dressed, Ai. I have a ship to run … it’s time for me to return to work.”

I nudged Xiùlán in the ribs as we entered the officer’s mess. Miranda and Kaidan were seated across from each other engrossed in quiet conversation as they ate their breakfast. At the other end of the table, Buchanan was sitting across from Kahlee Sanders; both were quietly talking as they enjoyed each other’s company, and what appeared to be their second coffees of the morning.

Xiùlán and I filled our trays and went to sit at a different table … the only table with just one diner. Sitting next to her, with Xiùlán taking a seat across from the two of us, we each offered her a good morning. “I was hoping to run into you before I had to leave, Jack. Do you have any questions for me before I head back to the Citadel?”

The woman looked me up and down with an appraising eye; after giving Xiùlán the once over as well, she grinned at me as she spoke in a quiet tone, “You two have been fucking each other’s brains out, haven’t you?”

I glanced at my Qíngrén, whose face was rapidly turning pink. Cocking my head as I began eating, I fixed the tattooed woman with a hard stare and replied, “As a matter of fact, we have. We’re lovers, Jack. That’s just one of the ways we express our love for each other.”

Jack must have expected me to deny her accusation; her face registered shock that I would so readily admit to having sex with another woman … and an Alliance captain at that. “Sonuvabitch,
Traynor. You don’t pull any punches, do you!?" After a few moments, she continued. “Must be difficult … you on the Citadel, or wherever you and that creepy machine call home …” she nodded in Xiùlán’s direction, “… and your lover on a Navy frigate. How do you stay sane in between … you know … opportunities?”

I showed my teeth in a wicked grin as I replied, “I don’t know about Xiùlán, but me? I masturbate … regularly!” Jack’s mouth fell open, as if to say ‘Oh-h-h’, though no sound emerged. I thought Xiùlán was going to explode from her efforts to maintain a straight face as I finished with a question of my own. “Why do you ask? How do you maintain your sanity, Jack?”

Unfortunately, Jack had just taken a swallow from her mug; she exploded in a coughing fit as a bit of liquid went down the wrong way. Regaining control of her spasming diaphragm, she gasped, “I really don’t think I need to answer that question for you, Traynor.” After drinking a bit more coffee, this time without choking on it, she set her mug down and eyed each of us in turn before adding, “I’ve never met anyone like you, Sammy. I wish you lived a bit closer – I think I’d enjoy getting to know you better.”

I grinned at her. “In reality, we’re only a few hours apart … and I’d like to know you better as well, Jack.” I took a bite of jam covered toast, chewed and swallowed before adding, “Too bad you weren’t on the Normandy during the Reaper War. It was a harrowing ride … I spent the entire war and a few months after not knowing if my Qíngfū was alive or dead.” Looking at Xiùlán, I concluded, “I can honestly say it sucked, in every way imaginable. Worst time of my life.”

Xiùlán added, “I, too, spent the war not knowing if Sà mǐ had survived the attack – she was on the ground in Vancouver when the bastards arrived.” With a loving glance that increased my heartrate, she added, “Not knowing what had happened? It really did suck … for both of us!”

“Qíng … Qíngfū?” Jack struggled to wrap her tongue around the Chinese word. “My translator must have crapped out … you’ll have to tell me what that means.”

“Nothing wrong with your translator, Jack. It’s Mandarin … Chinese language … means ‘lover’.”

Jack shook her head slightly; finishing her coffee, she set the mug down, looked at Xiùlán and said, “Interesting. You two are able to converse in an ancient Earth language that the best auto-translator computers we possess are unable to decipher. That must really come in handy.”

Xiùlán replied quietly, “Tā zài hěnduō chǎnhèng duì wǒmen hěn yǒuyòng.” [它在很多場合對我們很有用] With a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, she explained, “Means ‘It is very useful to us on many occasions’. Unfortunately, Sà mǐ has a ways to go before she can carry on even a simple conversation in Mandarin.”

I nodded my head as I said, “I’m just another illiterate Xīfāng rén [西方人] … uh, Westerner … when I visit her parents in Shanghai.”

“They survived the war?”

“They did … somehow. Shanghai’s a port city, so got pounded pretty hard by the Reapers, same as Vancouver.”

Jack’s gaze fell on Xiùlán again. “Nice to learn that your parents are alive, Captain.” She paused for a moment before abruptly pushing back and standing. “I have to get to work. Classes to teach.” Holding out a hand, she said, “It’s really nice to know you, Captain Yuán.” She pumped Xiùlán’s hand twice, then reached out to me; grabbing my forearm just below the elbow, she held on as she reached around with her left arm to partially embrace me. As our shoulders made
contact, she placed her cheek against mine; with her mouth beside my right ear, she whispered, “It’s really good to know you as well, Traynor … I’ll be in touch.” Releasing me, she took her tray to the cleanup area, looked at each of us for a moment, then was gone.

“Interesting woman, Sà mǐ.” Xiùlán sipped from her mug. “I know nothing of her background, yet, when I look at her, all I see is pain. There’s a lot of hurt buried under those scars and tattoos.”

“You have no idea, Xiùlán. Cerberus kidnapped her from her parents when she was a child … made them believe she had died from eezo-induced cancer. They took her to a secret lab … experimented on her … and others … all in an effort to create a human weapon with super biotic abilities.” Shaking my head in a sorrowful manner, I added, “Miranda knows her history better than I, but even she wasn’t privy to all the shit Cerberus inflicted on her.”

“Is ‘Jack’ her real name?”

“No one knows … not even Jack. Short for Jacqueline, perhaps? She was known as ‘Subject Zero’ during her stay at the Teltin facility on Pragia; uses ‘Naught’ as a surname when she needs one.” I sighed heavily as I thought of a defenseless child being tortured by so-called adults working for Cerberus. “I’m surprised she’s so … calm, after all the shit they put her through.”

“That stability is fragile, Sà mǐ. If not for her position here as an instructor … with young biotics to mentor … I fear what she could become. I’ll talk to Miranda once we’re back on the ship … learn what I can, just to satisfy my own curiosity.” Glancing at a chrono, she finished her tea, slowly stood and said, “I should get going, Sà mǐ … need to return to the Citadel, submit reports about our mission out here. I’ll use the travel time to write them.”

With a brief chuckle, I replied, “I probably should grab Buchanan and get going as well.”

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-ÊßIZKUR, AT LARGE ♦

“I’ve never met anyone like her, Sammy.” Griffen Buchanan was telling me of his lengthy conversations with Staff Commander Kahlee Sanders during our visit to Grissom Academy. “She was posted to the Alliance research base on Sidon in 2165 … left after ten years for a five year stint as a freelance consultant, before being recruited to a position working with young biotic students on Grissom Station’s Ascension project.”

“Sounds like you two hit it off, Griff.” I took a sip of tea as I thought about Sanders’ background.

“I really don’t think she’s in my league, Sammy. She is just so … scary smart … very much like you in her knowledge of tech. She actually designed and built a special L3 implant specifically calibrated for Jack … boosted her abilities to a level higher than the L5 unit with which she had been previously equipped.” Griff took a couple of bites of a sweet roll, followed by some coffee as he thought about the woman.

“Just because she’s smart doesn’t mean you can’t be friends with her, Griff.” I finished my tea, set the mug down and fixed him with a sharp stare. “Do you realize how special you are to me? I love you, Buchanan … like the big brother I never had. If I wasn’t in love with Xiùlán … I might even have a difficult time maintaining our professional relationship as data brokers.”

“Love comes in many varieties, Sammy.” He ducked his head in embarrassment for a moment, then fixed me with a steady gaze. “Your love for Xiùlán doesn’t mean we cannot love each other as well. I can accept the fact that you and I can never have anything physical between us.” With his ears and cheeks turning a ruddy shade of crimson, he added softly, “Well shit … did that sound
as weird to you as it did to me?”

“Damn!” I chuckled at his turn of phrase and replied, “I was beginning to worry we were going to have a problem, big guy.” I stood and moved past him towards our kitchen area. “I’m glad you see things so clearly.” As I started to wash the dishes, he brought his in, then grabbed a towel and began to dry. In a thoughtful tone, I said, “Back to Broker business, okay? While Irin is taking us to the Citadel, I want to follow up on Zaeed Massani’s travels in the Terminus … see if he actually made landfall on Sanctum.”

“All right, then. I’ll look into Kryllè Ghydgryz a bit more.”

“Sounds good, Griff … but I’d also like for you to focus on the money trail left by that deal-broker – batarian, name of Ugrolya Rarfenak. He took a cut—over and above the 65-mil Ghydgryz was paid—for arranging the sale of that asari figurine to the Blue Suns, and he screwed K’ath Din’sari out of her promised share once she had set up the meeting. Hell, she would have paid with her life if Paddok Wiks hadn’t intervened.”

“All right, Sammy. I’ll start turning over rocks … see what crawls out from underneath.”

♦ BRAVO WARD, AT LARGE • CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

I had been splitting my time between our apartment and Iringù-Eßizkur while Griff and I were pursuing our several existing lines of inquiry … as well as our standard, every day data-mining, the stock-in-trade of the Shadow Broker.

Buchanan continued to impress me with his acumen for uncovering secrets others did not want discovered. I had quickly come to appreciate his highly analytical mind … something the Systems Alliance—for all its so-called expertise in matching service members to jobs for which they were best suited—seemed to have completely overlooked. Their loss was my gain.

I had been running down leads concerning the Blue Suns’ illegal purchase of the asari figurine recovered from Mavigon by the turian Septivus Vulpez. While I was looking at the threads connecting the carving’s illegal sale, I made a rather startling discovery, completely unrelated to anything we were researching. A man—a term I applied rather loosely—not only survived the Reaper War, but had been given a cushy job within the human ambassador’s offices on the Citadel. Lt. Commander Garrett Sutton … even after being relieved of command at Arcturus for malfeasance, you still managed to land on your feet. You Goddamned dirty sonuvabitch! Who’s pulling your strings now that the Illusive Man is dead?

I had always believed everyone aboard Arcturus Station had been spaced when it was obliterated by the Reapers at the beginning of the war. Guess he made it off the station before they showed up. Putting that knowledge aside for further investigation when I had a bit of free time, I continued to root through the hidden activities of the Blue Suns, and finally discovered the trail I had been looking for.

“Griff! Take a look at this.” I sent the file to his terminal aboard Iringù-Eßizkur. “Turian female, name of Caecidia Verinus – runs the Blue Suns outpost on Sanctum, in the Decoris system. Might be Massani’s target, but the only way we have of getting in touch with ’im is to send a text to his omnitool.”

“Send him a message, Sammy, without going into specifics … he may be monitored. Ask him to contact us when it’s safe for him to do so.”
“I’ll do that. Have you had any luck tracking our batarian hustler’s credit trail?”

“I have. Unlike our pirate captain Ghydgryz, Ugrolya Rarfenak stayed on Omega after getting paid; doesn’t appear he’s been living large – probably to avoid being noticed by Queen Aria.”

“Damn. I need to make a call to Thessia, Griff … see if Lady Liara has, or had, any enforcers on Omega Station. I don’t want to go back there again … place is a fuckin’ pitshole, and that’s being kind.”

“Okay, Sammy … I’ll finish what I’m doing here, then join you. Want to get something to eat at the Smoke House?”

“Sounds perfect. See you inna bit.”

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SMOKE HOUSE CAFÉ, DELTA WARD

After ordering our dinners—each of us had decided the fresh meatloaf with rice and steamed veggies sounded good—we sipped our drinks as we traded progress reports in quiet voices. “I sent a text to Massani … asked him to call me at 0930 Sanctum local time. That’ll be 2145 local.”

Taking a sip of beer, I added, “Also placed a call to Thessia, but didn’t mark it urgent, so should be hearing back in the morning.”

Griff used his fork to poke around a bit in his salad. “I finally managed to dig up the account numbers for Ghydgryz and Rarfenak,” he said, fingers across his mouth to mask his words. “Ghydgryz is nearly broke … hardly enough creds left to keep his last account open, and I don’t expect any will remain once the Council seizes it all on behalf of the Alliance.”

Taking a mouthful of greens, he chewed thoughtfully for a few moments, swallowed, then took a couple of swallows of beer. “On the other hand, Rarfenak has several accounts, no two of which are held by the same institution.”

“Sounds like a smart person … scattered accounts—particularly if they’re with unaffiliated institutions—significantly decreases the risk that the entire amount could be seized, for whatever reason.”

I looked up as the waitress, an asari maiden, brought our dinners to the table. Once she had left to bring each of us another beer, I said, “Are any of his accounts here on the Citadel?”

Griff nodded as he took a bite of meatloaf, followed by a forkful of rice. “Batarian owned … branch of what was a medium-sized state bank on Khar’shan. Comms with the planet are still spotty. Near as I can determine, none of our large mechanical friends have visited since they steam-rolled through the system at the start of the war.”

“Very little remains, Griff. People? … Infrastructure? … All decimated. Survivors have banded together with the peoples of Camala and Erszbat … formed a confederacy of sorts. Of course, being batarians, they agree on virtually nothing and seem to be in a state of perpetual deadlock.”

Griff nodded as he continued to make short work of his dinner. Polishing off his beer, he set the glass down and shoved his plate away. “End of the war, former Captain Ka’hairal Balak returned to Kite’s Nest with the remnants of the batarian military fleet; he’s been using his charm and influence since then to keep the confederacy from fracturing the same way as the Hegemony.”

“Doesn’t really have any bearing on our Mr Rarfenak, other than the blanket amnesty offered by the confederacy to all of the Terminus batarians.” Thinking about what I needed to do, I asked, “You say he’s still on Omega Station? … any chance he may have left?”
Griff showed his teeth in a brief grin. “He’s still on Omega, Sammy. Our agent reports he is seen in the batarian enclave every day. Seems he’s been using his many connections to obtain a lot of the relief supplies that are being shipped to each of the three planets.”

I had finished my dinner as well. “Come on, then. I don’t want to have to rush to get back to the apartment, but I would like to do a bit more research before Massani calls.”

◆ 2150 Hours · Shadow Broker’s Residence, Bravo Ward ◆

I answered the comms call in full ‘Broker’ mode – a shadowed silhouette with the vocal tones of a monster. “Zaeed Massani. What services do you require from the Shadow Broker?” I could see the old merc was not impressed … or fooled … by my act; still, he played along, which told me he thought it possible he was being monitored.

“I’m callin’ fer infawmashun. Need ter know everythin’ yew ’ave on Blue Suns operashuns on Sanctum.”

“Have you found Caecidia Verinus? … she’s turian … runs the Blue Suns outpost there.”

“Heard ov ’er … ’aven’t seen ’er. Lots ov fuckin’ batarian soldiers down there, plus …” a gravelly chuckle, then, “… a bunch ov middle managemen’ turians, struttin’ all ’round like people should be kissin’ their goddamned boots. Blue Suns’ soldiers ’ere are scarce, but da ones what are ’ere are mostly turian. I get da impression Verinus don’t like squints … can yew believe dat?” Voicing the question, he shook his head as if knowing what my answer would be.

“With Dal’Serah and Santiago in Alliance custody, Verinus is the closest thing the Suns have as an overall leader. She was supposed to relocate to Zorya … a planet with which I trust you are quite familiar. Reports from Zorya claim the Suns’ leadership do not want her there … they believe her to be nothing more than a troublemaker … like an amalgamation of all the worst traits of Dal’Serah and Santiago.” I paused for a moment; when Zaeed offered no comment, I continued, “She needs to disappear … quietly … and permanently.”

“Is da Alliance payin’ fer da ’it?”

“The Systems Alliance does not sanction operations such as this, Massani. I am sure they would prefer a capture; if you provide irrefutable evidence of Verinus’ demise to Captain Cody, it is possible you may be compensated for your efforts.” I paused to retrieve a computer file, which I electronically attached to the carrier transmitting our conversation. “There’s all the intelligence I have concerning the turian’s known travels between home and office, and her contacts … you should have no difficulty discovering the rest on your own.”

Zaeed looked down as his comms unit received the data, then returned his one-eyed gaze to me and asked, “What do I owe fer dis infawmashun?”

Massani was never well-off financially, but I felt sure he still had a major portion of what the Alliance had paid for his capture of Santiago and Dal’Serah. “My standard rates apply for this transaction, Massani. I expect payment within ten days.”

“Guess I be’er shove off, then.” He reached down and cut the connection; I sat back in my chair as the screen went black. Zaeed was exceptionally good at what he did … I hoped he would be able to quickly finish the hunt for Verinus. Eliminating her would throw the Suns in that region into disarray, as they had no one capable of taking her place on short notice. I had no illusions that the loss of six capitol ships and the disappearance of a highly placed leader would cripple their
Reading the source code for the incoming comms call, I relaxed slightly as I sat in front of the terminal to answer. The image of a beautiful asari maiden with brilliant blue eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks smiled at me as I accepted the call. “Lady Liara … it is always a treat for me to speak with you. Thank you for returning my call.”

“It is my pleasure to speak with you once again, Ms Traynor. How have you been … and how is Mr Buchanan?”

“We are both fine, and thank you for asking. May I presume you and Rachaél are doing well?”

“We are. It’s amazing how relaxing a galaxy-wide peace can be.” Her face took on a slightly more serious expression as she said, “Now, tell me how you have really been doing.” She actually smirked with her last question. “What troubles have you and your partner gotten up to?”

I spent the next ten minutes relating all that had taken place in our lives since the last time we spoke, including the revelation that Kryllé Ghdygryz had been captain of Dragon’s Greed, my side trip to Grissom Station, and my conversation with Zaeed Massani the previous evening.

Liara nodded thoughtfully as she replied, “It is good to know that Jack … and Kahlee Sanders … are once again working on the station. Each was an incredible asset during the war.”

“Major Alenko is doing a fabulous job there … repairs and reconstruction are continuing, although I get the impression he feels progress is much too slow.”

“That station is huge, Sammy … Cerberus and the Reapers inflicted a lot of serious damage.”

“I know.” I shook my head minutely at the memories of a galaxy besieged, then asked, “Does it surprise you that I recruited Jack as a Broker asset?”

“That … is surprising … I cannot imagine Grissom Station would provide much information of any value to you, Samantha.” Liara glanced off to her side before commenting, “You did not tell me how Jack responded.”

I replied with a grim smile. “After I laid it all out for her, I gave her an auto-encrypting transceiver – little something of my own design. It can utilize the station’s deep-space antenna arrays without being plugged into their systems. Being my agent won’t interfere with her teaching job … all she needs to do is keep her eyes and ears open.”

Before she could respond, I brought up the main reason I had wanted to speak with her. “Liara, I need to know … Have you held back any of the Broker assets from me?” Her immediate look of embarrassment actually answered my question, but I pressed on, nonetheless. “I lived with you on board Normandy, Liara … even shared your bed. During our time together, I came to know you as a very caring individual. I also discovered you possess a titanium spine. You may not have relished the … less than civilized aspects of the job you inherited … but you never hesitated to deploy agents to perform wet work when it was required.”

“Oh, Goddess,” she whispered, hand in front of her eyes, thumb and fingers massaging her temples. After several moments of silence, she dropped her hand and directed her full attention to my image on her terminal, the brilliant blue eyes from before now reflecting a shade of steel. In a tone I had heard only once before—within Žiuk’Durman, right after I used my fists to drop Javik to
the deck—she asked, “Why bring this up now, Ms Traynor? Have you a need for agents capable of performing … wet work? And why would I hold back any other Broker assets?”

Returning her steady gaze without flinching, I replied, “Liara, I am fully committed to my new role as the apex information broker in the galaxy. As such, I require access to the entire network … all the resources you had at your fingertips during your time as the Broker … particularly before the war, in that massive vessel orbiting Hagalaz.” Softening my expression and my voice, I concluded, “I believe you were waiting, Lady Liara … to discover if I would somehow fail … fail to live up to your expectations; I have not failed. I believe I have met or exceeded your hopes. Please … I need to have all of the resources that were available to you.”

The steely glint in her eyes had faded as I spoke to her; she smiled at me … or rather, my image on her terminal, light years away on the asari homeworld. “You are correct, Samantha … I am holding back … quite a lot, actually, and for that, I apologize … though the numbers are obviously less than what existed before the war; I can see now that you fully intend to rebuild the network to the level that my predecessor enjoyed.” She turned her head, apparently studying something … or someone … in the room with her.

With a brief nod, she returned her attention to me, saying, “Come to Thessia, Sammy. Before I do this, I want very much to meet with you … and Mr Buchanan … in person. Once I am satisfied, I will encode everything you need on several OSDs … much more secure for me to hand them to you than to transmit everything across space, even on a secure channel.”

I knew the surprise I felt was visible in my expression as I asked, “Liara … are you sure?”

“Quite sure, Sammy. You and Mr Buchanan will be our guests at the estate … it will be our honor to be your hosts.”

In a voice expressing a touch of skepticism, I asked, “You have enough space for Iringù-Ebizkur to land nearby?”

“Of course. I’ll send landing coordinates to you when you achieve orbit.” With an anticipatory smile, she signed off by saying, “We’re looking forward to your visit … Shadow Broker.”

After Liara’s visage faded from the screen, I sat back in my chair, having done my best to conceal my feelings while the connection was still active. The astonishment … the shocking realization … of the subtle shift in her perception of me was hitting me hard. My mind was divided, trying to chase two thoughts at the same time … the first, I couldn’t help but wonder if Liara had seen the involuntary shudder I had worked so hard to suppress, and the second … Holy shit! Liara T’Soni had just called me … the Shadow Broker!

She had used my new title nearly every time we had spoken since I had taken over the network, but this time … this time … there was something different in the way Liara said the words—her emphasis, her enunciation, something—that had sent a chill down my spine and made it hard to think about anything else. Before today, it seemed to be merely a title … but something which I could not name had just shifted and it suddenly became … more … much more.

I was actually doing this; an entity that in my wildest dreams—at least not before the Reaper War and the galaxy going completely to hell I never would have considered—I had just become. Somehow, simply with how she had said the words, it felt as if Liara was finally ready to convey the full responsibility and authority of the job upon me. The Shadow Broker.
After a long walk followed by a light lunch, I was finally able to concentrate well enough to return to my info feeds. I thought once again about my discovery that Lt. Commander Garrett Sutton had landed a cushy position inside the human ambassador’s offices on the Citadel, even after being relieved of his position at Arcturus Station for malfeasance.

His escape from Arcturus Station—seemingly just days prior to the Reapers pouring into Kite’s Nest at the beginning of the war—just didn’t sit right with me. The man was a boil on humanity’s ass; that he was still alive and able to enjoy his life when so many others had died simply wasn’t justice. That he had been a Cerberus directed puppet when he fucked my personal Alliance record with a black mark before having me transferred to the shipyard was all the reason I required to begin plotting his demise. *I need to make his death appear like a dreadful accident … the unfortunate malfunction of a personal shield generator will do the job nicely, but only if he knows it is a gift from me, seconds before he dies … need to research the layout of the human ambassadorial wing of the embassies …*”

I was glowering at my terminal display as I thought about Sutton and Cerberus. The Illusive Man’s organization had splintered once news of his death had reached Earth. As much as he had always claimed Cerberus was an ideal … not dependent on any one person … the group rapidly fell apart without the charismatic leadership—and vast wealth—previously provided by Jack Harper. As I scrolled through the enormous amount of data tied to Garrett Sutton, I came upon several transcripts of some of his many comms calls with the Illusive Man.

With increasingly outraged disbelief, I learned my theories of Cerberus’ complicity in having me transferred—first, to the shipyard, then to Alliance R&D outside London—actually had validity. It had been Sutton who had attempted—through Kelsey Winters—to have me murdered, after I had nearly sliced Michael Moser Lang’s throat open the night he attacked me. It came as a bit of a shock to learn Jack Harper and Sutton had calmly discussed ending my life … all because of Lang’s failed vendetta. The transcript also provided proof—not that it would ever see the light of day—that Lang’s death due to a so-called *equipment* failure at the civilian freight docks had *not* been the unfortunate accident reported by the yard superintendent. *Not that it really mattered now … not with the deaths of everyone having any involvement with Sutton’s machinations.*

As I researched Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton’s Cerberus-directed actions, I was further amazed upon discovering just how many years he had been working for them. Looking at what might have seemed to be his ancient history—shortly before he had been assigned to his post on Arcturus Station—three names nearly leapt out at me: Heather Gonzales, Marianna Walsh and Darius Holden. *Sonuvabitch! He was involved in Heather’s murder as well?* As I thought back to the days and weeks I’d spent training on Mars, I wondered for a moment if he had known about *me* back then. *Not possible. I couldn’t actively investigate Heather’s death, nor Walsh and Holden’s mysterious deaths in their cells, while still in school. I couldn’t even travel to Earth in order to attend Heather’s funeral.*

I no longer gave a damn about Walsh, or Holden … that they had paid the ultimate price for Heather’s murder at the Prothean dig site on Mars was poetic justice. Discovering that Sutton—acting at Jack Harper’s behest—had placed Walsh in our SpecOps unit as a ‘student’ was the incontrovertible evidence I had coveted ever since she had viciously sliced Heather’s throat open; learning he had subsequently directed Walsh’s murder, along with Holden’s, during their stay in an Alliance lockup was a genuine revelation. Whatever reasons I may have had for wanting to see Sutton pay for his mistreatment of me … of my personal record in the Alliance Navy … now paled in comparison to this newly uncovered material. *After all these years, I finally have what I need in order to bring Heather some real justice for her untimely death.*

As I pondered on all I had just learned, I thought briefly about contacting my *Inamorata* in order to
share my discoveries with her … and mentally kicked myself for even entertaining the thought. No! Smarter to leave her completely ignorant of this discovery … and of what I intend to do. Her love for me would place her in direct conflict with her sworn duty to the Alliance. Better she learns of my involvement after Sutton meets his end … if I even choose to tell her about it at all.

Upon glancing at the chrono, I was a bit surprised by the lateness of the hour; Buchanan would be returning from Iringù-Eßizkur, where he was still researching Ugrolya Rarfenak’s financial background. He had grown genuinely accustomed to working alone inside the destroyer-class Repository … professing to enjoy listening to the ancient melodies she played for her own amusement. It was something I would never have expected from him, as he hadn’t been keen on working and living within a former adversary. I wasn’t going to tell him of Irin’s recent conversation with me in which she admitted that, after spending the majority of her millennium-long existence alone, she actually enjoyed his company.

As if on cue, I heard the access hatch unlatch and open, followed by footsteps entering the landing. I locked my terminal and stood to greet him as he descended the circular stairs from our rooftop speeder garage. “Hey, Griff. We’re going to take a trip to Thessia in the morning … Lady Liara needs to meet with me … um, us.”

“How long will we be staying, Sammy?”

“Now that you ask, she didn’t specify… but I imagine it will be just one night.” I spoke over my shoulder as I moved to the kitchen. “If all goes well, she’s going to release the rest of the network to our control, including the agents that specialize in the less savory aspects of the Shadow Broker’s business. We’ll leave right after we eat … Iringù-Eßizkur’s FTL ability should have us there by mid-morning local time.”

Griff yawned before observing, “Guess we’ll need to sleep while she’s traveling.”

“Sure. Our research is partially automated, so it’ll continue while we rest. I’m looking forward to visiting Liara and Shepard at the estate … I only wish we could have been there for her bonding ceremony with Spectre Shepard.”

Griff chuckled. “That would have been a real treat, Sammy.” After a moment, he concluded, “At least now, the place won’t be overrun with all their guests. Ought to be a peaceful visit.”
Learning Self-Restraint

She is unpredictable, and unpredictable is another word for ‘threat’ when a woman wears it well.
– Nikita Gill, *Fierce Fairytales: Poems and Stories to Stir Your Soul*

*Ardat* – demon (Thessian/Source: CDN)

*GST* – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

*Húdié dāo* – [蝴蝶刀 – butterfly sword] (knife in English)

*Ioniín álainn* – beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

*Irin* – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

*Liǔyè dāo* – literally, a willow leaf saber; military sidearm for cavalry and infantry during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties in China. It weighs from 0.9 to 1.3 Kg, and is 91 to 99 Cm. long.

*NDA* – Non-Disclosure Agreement, signed by Yuán and Traynor at termination of the Ø7 program

*Ø7* – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations and the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

*Siame* – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-EßIZKUR, AT LARGE ⋆ ATHENA NEBULA ♦

As promised, I was awakened at 0600 GST by the sounds of musical instruments never heard or seen by humans, or any other race currently residing in the Milky Way. Iringù-Eßizkur had a vast library of strangely ethereal music, all of it performed by incredibly ancient races … races of people that were over 350,000 years extinct. I sat on the edge of my bed, holding my head in both hands with my elbows resting on my thighs.

As the lighting level in my room gradually increased, my ancient friend asked the same question she asked whenever I awakened from a night spent within her structure.

›How are you this morning, Shadow Broker?<

“I just fine, Irin … just fine.” I used my fingers to comb through the tangled mess my hair had become while I slept, thinking, *I really should get this trimmed.* “Where are we, then?”

›We will enter the Parnitha star system in one standard hour; once in system, I will set a course for Thessian orbital insertion.‹

Surprised by this, I stood and took the few steps necessary to reach the bathroom. As I sat and relieved myself, I softly asked, “We left Widow over eight hours ago … was there some problem with relay alignment?”

Irin’s mechanical voice held a tinge of what I had come to recognize as embarrassment while she replied, ›I have traveled only minimally since you and Buchanan-Griffen began employing my structure for Broker business on a full-time basis. It is … exhilarating … to once again be traveling somewhere … anywhere … between systems.‹ After a brief pause, Iringù-Eßizkur continued in the same seemingly embarrassed tone.

›I chose to bypass the relays completely … I

"
traveled between the nebulas utilizing my own faster-than-light capabilities.

I pondered this as I finished my business, stood up and entered the shower stall; turning the water on initiated a semi-opaque kinetic barrier to contain the spray. After lathering and washing my hair and body, I spent several minutes simply standing under the rainfall showerhead with my arms outstretched, palms placed above my head against the tiled wall, in order to enjoy the sensations brought on by the warm water falling onto my head and sluicing down my body. Finally shutting the water off, I stepped out to dry myself, wrung most of the water from my hair and moved back into my bedroom to get dressed. I still had questions for Iringù-Eßizkur, but they would keep until after I had downed at least two cups of coffee and eaten my breakfast. As it turned out, she had a question for me.

Shadow Broker: I get the sense you disapprove of my choice to avoid use of the relays. May I inquire as to why?

I considered this as I joined Griff in the small kitchen area; my partner, having made a full pot of coffee, greeted me with a cheery ‘good morning!’ and a filled mug. Taking a sip as I sat at the counter, I finally responded to Irin’s question. “No disapproval was intended or implied, Irin. Your choice simply surprised me. Would you care to share your reasons?”

Responded after a short delay, she said, To use an old human expression, Friend-Samantha … I needed to ‘stretch my legs’. I was able to travel through the void at my sustained maximum speed for several hours. It felt … good … a feeling akin to that which I felt while transporting supplies to meet Žiuk'Durmah, when Shepard-Normandy was running short of fuel and food.

I shook my head minutely at Griff’s expression of puzzlement while asking, “Do Repositories actually need to travel through interstellar space in order to feel … alive?”

I can only answer for myself, as I no longer know the minds of the others. When I am docked at the Citadel, it is a privilege for me to serve your needs … the needs of Buchanan-Griffen. When I am transporting you to some destination in another system, I am still serving your needs, but … you must understand that I take immense pleasure in simply making the journey.

Griff, having continued preparing breakfast while I spoke with Irin, set a plate of scrambled eggs and hash browns in front of me before taking a seat across from mine to begin eating from his own platter. After taking a couple of bites of potatoes followed by a sip of coffee, he looked up at me and asked, “Having trouble?”

“Apparently, Irin’s a free spirit, and we’re keeping her tied down more than she likes,” I snarked, knowing we were being monitored by our enormous friend.

Her response was immediate, and about as expected. That is not what I said, Shadow Broker-Trainor.

With a wry chuckle, I replied, “Irin, I understand … you are truly alive, and you get bored. I can assure you, Griff and I place great value on your contributions to our efforts. We wouldn’t have been able to have made the trip to Elysium so easily, or Grissom Station, nor would we currently be approaching the Athena Nebula, if we were required to depend on a crewed transport.” I paused for a sip of coffee, then finished with, “You have my sincere apologies for ever seeming to take you … or your services … for granted, Iringù-Eßizkur.”

Griff added, “That’s all true, Irin. I’ve come to trust you during these past weeks … certainly not something that could have happened right after the war’s conclusion, even though Spectre Shepard
chose synthesis to put an end to it.”

The slight ring of embarrassment apparent in her tone had changed to one of delight. As a cheery tune began playing from the speakers in the overhead, she said, “I have crossed into the Athena Nebula … entering the Parnitha System in forty minutes.”

“Watch out for asari spacecraft, Irin. It would be unfortunate if our visit here were to be remembered only for your collision with one of their ships.”

“I am approaching Thessia from above its orbital plane, Shadow Broker.” Unlike the cheery tone of seconds ago, Irin’s voice reflected sadness. “Even before the relays were constructed, it was discovered very early on by my race that—as a matter of practicality—very few organics travel more than a few degrees above or below the planetary orbital plane. Our understanding of this trait greatly enhanced our abilities to avoid early detection during invasions.”

I replied with a shake of my head. “Every time I think I have learned every dirty secret used by the Reapers to make people’s lives a living, deadly hell, you surprise me with something new.” Having finished breakfast, I took my plates and utensils to the sink and began washing up. Griff came up beside me to add his dishes, then dried and put everything away as I thought about thousands of murderous machines entering our galaxy through the Citadel gateway.

Iringù-Ebízkur said no more as we finished cleaning up; I poured us each a second cup of coffee, picked my own mug up and walked into our lounge area, there to sit in the comfortable chair and watch Irin’s planetary approach on the large monitor. Even though decelerating, she was still moving at a mind-numbing velocity.

Upon using a polar orbit to completely circle the planet once, Irin changed course and brought us to a geo-synched position over the vast city of Armali, where it was still early morning. I walked around the partition to our research area, there to sit before the secure comms terminal; I placed the call to the T’Soni estate and waited … in a few moments, an image of an asari I had never seen resolved on the viewscreen. In a ‘no nonsense’ tone of voice she said, “Your ship identity is masked. Please state your business.”

Engaging Iringù-Ebízkur’s transponder, I smiled briefly as I replied, “Samantha Traynor, traveling with Griffen Buchanan; we have traveled here to meet with your mistress, Lady Liara T’Soni.”

The asari huntress allowed a hint of a smile to show as she replied, “The Lady has informed everyone here of your imminent visit, Ms Traynor. I am Huntress Jutika T’Vani. I can now see that you are traveling within a …” T’Vani paused for a moment to look down at her console. Returning her gaze to the viewscreen, she continued in a questioning tone, as if not quite believing the information in front of her. “… within a Destroyer-class Reaper?”

With a chuckle, I responded, “Your information is correct, Huntress T’Vani … Iringù-Ebízkur is my guardian Repository, although …” I paused to think of how best to explain. “She does not belong to me … or anyone. She is … my friend. That said, she is quite large, so will need adequate space in which to set down.”

T’Vani grinned back at me. “Please. You may simply call me Tika. And you may rest assured the Lady took great pains to explain the area requirements for your … conveyance. All of our vessels have been repositioned to accommodate this visit. Transmitting landing coordinates now.”

Buchanan, who had entered the compartment and remained outside of camera range, nodded to me as Irin’s nav-array pinged in response to the transmission.

“Coordinates received, Tika. Thank you. Please inform Lady T’Soni we will arrive in thirty
minutes.”

“Noted, Ms Traynor. We are looking forward to your visit.” Acknowledgement complete, she terminated the connection.

I addressed the small console to my right, saying, “Okay, Irin … you can travel up the coast to the T’Soni estate, and set us on the ground there, please.”

>As you wish … Friend-Samantha.<

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

Watching the precision with which Iringù-Eßizkur gently set her clawed feet on the pavement was of more interest to the people gathered behind the barrier below than it was to me, safely inside her structure … I had witnessed it a number of times, from much closer than anyone outside was standing. I studied the upturned faces of the people below as Irin settled on the surface … most were interested, some were fearful, one or two distrustful.

I could well understand the trepidation from anyone that had endured attacks by similar machines during the war; from the ground, looking up at Iringù-Eßizkur’s massive ultra-black form was no less than the stuff from which nightmares were formed. Irin’s voice shook me from my thoughts.

>We are securely on the ground, Friend-Samantha. I am extending the transfer tube in order that you and Buchanan-Griffen may depart to greet those outside.<

During Iringù-Eßizkur’s descent to the planet’s surface, I had changed into my armor, with my Húdié dāo in sheaths strapped to my boot tops and the hilt of my Liyè dāo sitting just above and behind my right shoulder. I was confident I would require neither my blades nor my armor on this visit, but I never left the security of Irin’s structure or my Bravo Ward apartment on the Citadel unless I was armed and armored; it was a habit I’d begun after Cartagena Station. My dark gray leather duster hid most of this from casual view; the only hint I might be more than I seemed was my heavy boots.

I grabbed my travel bag and stepped into the nearly weightless environment of the translucent tube. Stepping out at the bottom, I waited for Griff to exit the device; we both walked up to greet my former commander and her beautiful bride. “Captain Shepard,” I said, grasping the proffered hand. “It’s really good to see you after all these months.” I released her hand as I turned towards Griff, saying, “Captain … this is Griffen Buchanan.”

As Shepard greeted Buchanan, I stepped up to my blue mentor. I felt the tears in my eyes escape, to slide down my cheeks as I embraced Lady Liara; more than aware of the ceramic-composite plates on my arms and chest, I hugged her gently and whispered in her ear, “I have missed having you in my life, Liara.” I pushed back in order to introduce Griff, saying, “This big guy does a fantastic job of keeping me on a singular path … I’d be lost without ’im.”

Liara greeted Buchanan like a long-lost friend, then turned to the people waiting patiently behind her. “Sammy … Griff … this is Captain Livos Tanni, team lead for my personal guard, and Matron Lyessa Raptos, steward for House T’Soni.” After greeting them both, Liara continued with, “Shall we go inside? We’d like to show you around the house … show you to your rooms, give you a chance to relax before we enjoy lunch.”

“Sounds good, Lady Liara,” I replied. “I’ve really been looking forward to this visit.”
The spacious rooms set aside for our stay were luxuriously appointed, to the point that Griff commented as we met in the long hallway leading to the grand staircase. “Sammy, this place puts every cheap-assed hotel room … and every nasty little apartment it has ever been my misfortune to reside in over the years …” he waved a hand around above his head to emphasize his point, “… completely to shame. Mind you, the level of luxury I was ever able to afford, especially post-war, has a great deal to do with my distinct lack of experience with nice accommodations. Hell, even my rooms on Grissom Station were rather austere. But this? I have to admit … I’ll be rather disappointed when it comes time to take our leave for our return to the Citadel!”

I smiled up at my partner as we began descending the stairs. “Then I suppose it’s a good thing that we’ll only be here for one night … two, at the most.” I added with a smirk, “Don’t forget who owns this estate, Griff. House T’Soni is in the top three of the most important and influential houses on Thessia. Any guests that find themselves staying the evening are most likely from highly important houses themselves … politically speaking, of course; anyone staying the night at this estate, or Liara’s residence in Armalı, would be treated to the highest level of luxurious service no matter their station in life, whether on Thessia or any other planet.”

As I finished speaking, a matriarch—a huntress, by the look of her attire—greeted us at the wide entrance to the rather large dining hall; to refer to it as a mere dining ‘room’ did not do it justice. “You must be Liara’s friends, Traynor and Buchanan.” Abruptly sticking one hand out in the human fashion, she continued, “I’m Aethyta. Liara’s dad. She warned me you’d be hanging around for a day or two.” Smirking, she added, “Told me to behave myself, but I don’t honestly believe that’s possible.”

I couldn’t help but grin as I reached out to take her hand in mine. Nodding respectfully, I replied, “I assure you, the pleasure is all mine, Aethyta.” Seeing her momentary puzzlement, I added, “Don’t look so surprised.” I chuckled, knowing that I had caught her off guard with my quick acceptance of her utter disregard for proper asari decorum. “Even if only half of what I’ve been told about you is true, I know better than to tempt fate by calling you ‘Matriarch’.”

As I released her hand, she laughed and then turned to face Griff, who had the good sense to simply follow my example. He was also grinning as he said, “My pleasure as well. Can’t say I’ve heard all the stories about you, but I trust my partner, so I do believe I’ll follow her lead … Aethyta. Friends call me Griff.”

“Liara did say you two were smarter than most of the humans I’ve met,” Aethyta smirked. “And I’m always happy to meet friends of my daughter’s.” Turning back towards me, she said, “Though, Liara has told me a few stories about you as well, Ms Traynor; including something about an altercation … during Normandy’s return trip from the edge of the galaxy?”

I could feel my cheeks flushing slightly at her revelation. “Then I must assume she also informed you of our subsequent reconciliation … otherwise, I am fairly certain I never would have made it in the front door.” We fell into step beside her as she led us to a nearby table. “It is only because of her forgiveness that I am here today.”

She responded with a gravelly chuckle. “She did mention that … and also indicated you are a very interesting … and passionate woman.” Glancing back towards the entrance, she concluded, “Ah, but our time is up – my Little Wing is here, Ms Traynor … along with her pain-in-the-ass lover and bondmate.” Aethyta smiled at Liara and Rachael as they walked up to join us, completely oblivious—or, more likely—simply good at ignoring the disapproving glare from her daughter. She raised a hand in farewell as she added, “Please … enjoy your lunch,” before turning and walking away.
“Sammy … welcome! You as well, Griff. I am thrilled to have both of you as our guests.” Rachaël Shepard smiled as she placed a hand on each of our shoulders. Turning to face Buchanan, she said, “Griff, I intend to monopolize your time here, especially as Liara will be meeting with Sammy concerning all the minutia of being an info broker. It will be a treat for me to hear about your experiences during the war … that is, if the telling does not dredge up a bunch of unhappy memories.”

Buchanan grinned at the Spectre. “I will be happy to share my experiences with you, Captain, even though I expect your time during the war was far more interesting.”

Shepard chuckled in a scoffing manner as she led Griff to the large table laden with selections of fish, cheese, veggies and fruits. “My time trapped within the Normandy’s computer would probably be of more interest to you, Griff. During the war I was just another soldier, not much different than you. I expect you had fewer responsibilities, and you probably never had to regularly engage with Cerberus soldiers.”

I couldn’t hear Buchanan’s reply, as Liara took me by the arm so we could begin loading our own plates for lunch. “I seem to recall you spent time traveling on an Oseros-class corvette—the Ionsai, I believe—so you most likely recall the different types of fish, cheese and vegetables we have for you today.”

I nodded as I inspected the offerings spread out in front of me. “First time I was introduced to asari foods, Liara. I developed a taste for galea and sharp uloth while traveling on that corvette.” I sighed while quietly adding, “Best time of my life … before Xiùlán was injured … before our program was terminated.”

Having made my selections, I poured a glass of Elasa for myself, then followed Liara back to the table, where we sat far enough from Griff and Rachaël that we could not easily hear their conversation, while still being close enough to be heard if we needed to speak with each other.

Liara sipped from her glass, then deftly picked up two of the large green leaves—yefal—from a side plate and nested them in one hand. Scooping a spoonful of ke’ah onto the leaves, she added a thin layer of uloth, added a generous portion of galea, then finished by topping it with a spoonful of the thick sauce on her plate. Rolling it all together, she took a bite, chewed and swallowed as I mirrored her actions.

“Delicious, Liara. I had nearly forgotten how much I enjoyed asari cuisine. It’s obvious to me I really need to visit more often, if only to have lunch or dinner with you.” I was amazed to discover just how hungry I had become since breakfast aboard Iringù-Eßizkur; quickly finishing my asari leaf roll, I assembled another, choosing this time to add the sweet and spicy sauce to the fish.

“You should know that you and Mr Buchanan are welcome to visit anytime, Sammy,” she said with a broad smile. “I truly consider you a member of my family so, even if we are not here, contact Lyessa and she’ll make the necessary notifications.”

Her words surprised me. As I pondered her statement, her bracelet caught the light for a moment, flashing its reflection in my eyes. Damn! I had missed her bonding ceremony with Shepard … hadn’t even seen what they had purchased from T’Rhyn’s Jewelry. “Your bracelet is beautiful, Liara. Did you find that at the shop I told Shepard of? … in Serrice?”

She glanced at her wrist, then returned her gaze to me. “T’Rhyn’s Jewelry. Farnia remembered you the instant Rachaël told her of your recommendation that we buy our bracelets there.” She placed her forearm in front of me so I could take a closer look.
I gently grasped her hand in order to inspect the polished yellow and rose gold cuff. “It’s quite breathtaking, Liara … particularly with that inset gem.” With a knowing smirk, I said, “Spectre Shepard picked this one out for you, didn’t she?” Releasing her hand, I concluded, “Since your ceremony, it cannot be removed?”

The asari grinned, taking a sip of Elasa before she replied. “Our bracelets fit comfortably but will no longer slide over our hands. In that way, they are symbolic of how unbreakable our bond truly is … of how the promises we made to each other are meant to be permanent, Sammy.”

Having finished a third leaf roll, I sat back in the chair as I polished off the last of my Elasa. “I should take a look at Shepard’s bracelet … see what she picked out for herself.”

Liara chuckled. “What makes you so sure I didn’t make the choice for her?”

I allowed an expression of pity to show briefly before grinning. “Really, Liara? You seem to have forgotten what I now do for a living.” I pushed my plate away and rose from my chair. “Speaking of which, I am ready to begin our … meeting? … in your office, or within Irin, if you are so inclined.”

Liara also stood. “We can meet in my office, Sammy. Truthfully, I have no desire to ever again set foot inside that machine. She served us admirably during our search for all of the Illusive Man’s bases of operation—particularly Lazarus Station—but my travels within her structure were not the best part of the experience.”

Nodding as we strolled out of the dining hall and down a passageway towards the rear of the main floor, I replied, “I was running comms on Normandy when you and Garrus asked for our assistance. I didn’t realize that setting you up to work inside Irin would continue to be so stressful for you. I am so sorry.”

Liara slipped a cool hand onto my wrist as she responded. “You have nothing to apologize for, Samantha. What you did … convincing Iringù-Ebizkur to allow me, and Garrus, to live and work inside her structure—to serve as an operations base and transport for us—enabled me to find and retrieve Shepard’s clones. My life since then has been more wonderful than I imagined it ever could be.”

She led the way into a richly appointed room, with a large desk on one side and a luxuriantly upholstered couch accompanied by several comfortable looking chairs on the other. The far wall was set with floor-to-ceiling windows, allowing a nearly unobstructed view of the beautiful flower gardens, shrubs and massive trees that comprised the rear yard; a glint of water—the Kendra Ocean—could be seen in the distance. A round wooden table with several matching chairs occupied the center of the room.

“This is a beautiful office, Liara. I believe I would be hard pressed to accomplish anything if I had to work in here for any length of time … I’d lose myself in staring out the windows.”

Liara spoke over her shoulder as she moved to her desk. “The view is like a tapestry that is continuously changing … with the weather, and the seasons. I never tire of it.”

The asari retrieved a flat package from the top of the desk before returning to the table. “Please, have a seat, Sammy. We can comfortably discuss our business here; once we’re done with all the documents in this packet, we can move to the couch or chairs to continue speaking of the many resources available to you as the Shadow Broker.”

I sat down with my back to her desk in order to avoid facing the windows; the view outside would
be enough of a distraction from the side. Liara took the chair to my right, opened the packet and slid the documents out onto the polished surface. “When we spoke yesterday, you asked about enforcers on Omega.” She handed me several papers as she continued, “Your answers are in here, including all the contact information for the small team that resides there.”

With a small grin, I glanced through the pages as I replied, “Team? I wouldn’t think Queen Aria would allow anything like that on *her* station.”

“She’s completely unaware of their existence; they work in the shadows, just as you do.”

“Thank you, Liara. Having access to a team on Omega will be of great benefit to a situation I would like to address.” I rose from my chair and moved to a nearby side table, where I poured a cup of *Kaffe* for myself. I looked at T’Soni with a questioning look; she shook her head slightly, so I returned to my chair, there to sigh in happiness after taking a sip of the delightful beverage.

“What situation on Omega requires the attention of the Shadow Broker, Sammy?”

I met her intent look with one of my own. “A batarian, Ugrolya Rarfenak by name, persuaded a young batarian female to set up a meeting between himself, a pirate captain and the Blue Suns. He promised her a small percentage of his ‘finder’s fee’, and then stiffed her.” I paused to take another sip of *Kaffé*, then continued. “She went to Jipaw Zilorno, our salarian agent on Omega in an attempt to get help; he promised he’d have credits for her in no time. All she received for her troubles was an attempt on her life by the Suns.”

Liara’s unhappy expression *should* have been all I needed to see; I held my breath as she asked, “Samantha, you have become an amazingly effective data miner, so why should the troubles of one batarian female—or of *any* singular being—be anything for the Shadow Broker to take a personal interest in?”

“Xiùlán and I were working for Asari High Command, tracking down a priceless figurine from the time of the Matriarchs’ explorations. I tracked K’ath Din’sari from a dingy apartment on Omega to an equally squalid apartment on the Citadel, down in the foundations of Echo Ward, where Xiùlán met with her.”

Liara nodded several times as I explained what to me was now ancient history. She spoke softly after I finished, but the strength of her conviction certainly rang through. “Samantha, you seem to forget just how good I was at my job … before the invasion, and during the war. I came across the records of your search for the carving of Janiri … you and Yuán provided the asari with a tremendous service by retrieving it, but …” Her pause lengthened from seconds to nearly a minute before she continued. “… but all of that must remain in the past.”

“I feel like I owe her, Liara.” I stood and began to pace, suddenly feeling as though I was on unstable ground but not understanding why. “She put her life on the line by meeting with Xiùlán, even if she didn’t realize it at the time. I cannot allow that debt to remain unpaid.”

“For you, as an Alliance agent, K’ath Din’sari could very possibly have been worthy of your attention … assuming she was even fortunate enough to survive the war.” Liara sighed sadly and shook her head slowly before continuing, “But now, as the Shadow Broker, your focus absolutely *must* shift to events of a much larger scale and import. Pursuing personal interests will eventually get you identified … and, when that happens, will likely end in your death. I could not bear to have that on my conscience, Samantha.”

I returned to my chair, the sincere, caring tone of Liara’s statement threatening to steal my conviction to help K’ath. I picked up my mug, took a sip of *Kaffe*, and leaned back, crossing my
legs at the ankles as I contemplated my reply. “It’s obvious we disagree about the best way to move forward on this.” I took the last sip of Kaffe while attempting to think of an acceptable course of action. “This being how I choose to run the Brokerage … so, please explain to me how me personally helping someone can get me killed?”

“You were not with us when we took down the previous Broker, Samantha … a yahg that had held the position for a half-century or longer.” Liara once again stared out the windows, her focus on nothing in particular; I watched her eyes turn to blue ice as she growled, “He took a personal interest in an agent, wanted him tortured and eventually dead … for no other reason than revenge … all to prove a point.” She looked at me once again and her eyes snapped back into focus, her gaze boring into me. “His name was Feron and, to the detriment of the Broker, he was a friend I was not willing to give up on. He had originally assisted me in retrieving … Rachael … from the Blue Suns, before they could turn her over to the Collectors … and I owed him the same in return. I was determined to get him back.”

“Was it not Feron that was referred to by your commandos as kena sa’ki? Didn’t Livos take care of him … permanently? … on Kahje, before the war?”

Her reply began as a raised brow-marking. “Yes, she did … right after his second betrayal.” She continued with a heavy sigh. “Anyway, I was getting close … too close, apparently. The Broker personally sent a hit squad—including Tela Vasir, an asari Spectre—to eliminate me. My Siame joined me to eliminate the Shadow Broker’s soldiers and take down Vasir, after which we departed Illium and followed the trail—with help from some crucial information provided by Cerberus—to track the ardats to his ship, in orbit above Hagalaz.”

“In short, I used Feron’s capture to hunt the Broker down and—with Shepard’s assistance—kill him. I never wanted the Brokerage – it was not my goal, yet it landed squarely in my lap when I suddenly realized the void that our actions had created.” Liara’s voice took on a hint of the fire she had previously used as she said, “The Broker fully exposed himself by allowing his vendetta against me to become personal … his heavy-handed attempt to have me eliminated totally backfired … and ultimately led to his death.”

She leaned forward in her chair and rested her arms on her desk, meeting my eyes as she continued quietly with a slight shake of her head. “It is not that I do not want you to have the full power of the Brokerage at your fingertips, Samantha Traynor.” She reached out and gently grasped my hand while pleading, “But you positively must see the parallel in these actions. It would surprise me if this Ugrolya Rarfenak did not have friends … friends that will not rest until his murderer is found and his death avenged. Do not follow the path of the yahg, Samantha … you must be smart about this and keep yourself above the fray!”

Seeing the concern in her face and hearing the logic of her words, I accepted her hand and squeezed it back, remaining silent for many moments as I contemplated her warning. “I honestly do feel obligated to get K’ath her finder’s fee … but, perhaps, I can approach the whole scenario from a different direction.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Sammy.” Liara’s eyes narrowed as she made her demand, so I knew I had to explain myself clearly … feeling as though my gaining access to the required Shadow Broker assets would be determined by what I said next.

Drawing a deep breath, I began. “Our salarian agent … Jipaw Zilorno? … when I met with him in 2181, I told him a 65-million credit transaction had taken place in a tavern near his office. I also informed him the proper transaction fees were never remitted to Aria T’Loak.” From her look of surprise, I knew Liara was not aware of this. “Perhaps it’s time that I rectify that omission. The
Broker’s agent could explain that, since the war has ended, we’ve had time to review all our records … and he could offer to provide Aria that information … for a modest percentage of that transaction fee.”

Liara bared her teeth in a grin. “Now, you’re thinking like the Shadow Broker, Sammy.”

“Thank you,” I chuckled as I polished off my mug of Kaffe. “Given our discussion concerning my history prior to the war … and especially since I no longer feel bound by the NDA the Alliance forced on me … Perhaps you would be willing to offer insight on a second matter close to my heart? … corruption within the Alliance?”

“Yet more corruption within the Alliance?” Liara released my hand and sat back, pursing her lips in thought before shaking her head. “With Rachaël finally deciding to leave the Alliance, I am somewhat loath to hear this … still, I know I must.” Liara sighed heavily and continued. “I will hear you out, even knowing that once I listen to this new discovery, I may regret agreeing to this.”

Nodding in understanding, I began. “I ran across another pain-in-my-ass from before the war.” After giving Liara a condensed version of all that had occurred from the time Griff and I had worked—and failed—to prevent the destruction of the turian vessel Anixara, through my arrival and stay at Arcturus Station, until my transfer to Earth immediately before the war, I spoke of my discoveries concerning one Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton. “I really hate to admit this to you, but I want to watch that bastard die, Liara … in the most painful way possible.”

By now, I was having a difficult time keeping my emotions reined in. “I’ve obtained the Alliance transcripts of his communications with the Illusive Man … those miserable fucking wankers actually had the bollocks to discuss the possibility of murdering me … along with my friends! … as casually as you and I might discuss the weather!”

Liara immediately leaned forward to give my hand another squeeze; her caring touch calmed me a bit as she quietly explained, “Please understand, Sammy. If I am to release the wet-squads to your control … they must only to be used to enforce Broker rules … not to carry out hits for personal vendettas; those are only to be completed as part of a contract … and are always arranged through an agent, not directly by the Broker.”

Releasing my hand, she stood, clasped her hands behind her and paced to the massive windows, there to contemplate the view of the extensive flower gardens and greenery that comprised her rear yard. After several minutes of silent observation, she turned to face me once more. “Every job must generate income and leave a definite trail, Sammy … those that made the request, be it a request for information or a request for … elimination … of a competitor. It is critical that you maintain your anonymity in order to remain alive … otherwise, you risk exposing yourself … and Mr Buchanan … to violent retribution.”

She walked slowly back to the table; retaking her seat, she continued to explain the need for caution. “This all comes back to Heather Gonzales’ murder on Mars—at the hands of Marianna Walsh—after which, your actions and reactions became a matter of record … Yes?”

When my resultant expression immediately confirmed her assumption, she did not wait for a verbal answer and quickly continued, “Were you to directly cause Sutton’s death, the inevitable question asked by investigators would be ‘Who could have wanted the lieutenant commander dead?’ If the answer points back to you personally, you have exposed yourself … your entire operation … to very undesirable scrutiny, Samantha.”

After several moments of silence, Liara smirked as she concluded, “So, my dear Shadow Broker, do you see the reasons that you cannot be so direct? Use the resources you have at hand to
discover another of Sutton’s enemies … a man like that must have more than a few; all you need is one! … one who has the desire … the need, to see him gone every bit as much as you! Find that person, Samantha! … then feed them what they need. Remember, there are three parts to a murder: desire, capability, and motive. Be patient … find that enemy … that one person in possession of all three, and fan the flames.”

I thought about what she had said, particularly concerning her own history with the previous Shadow Broker, and it made me wonder … if perhaps I had shared my new identity with a few too many people. I felt it was unfortunate that Captain Cody, Major Alenko, Zaeed Massani and Master Gunnery Sergeant Patton already knew what I was doing; it was also possible that Admiral Hackett and Miranda Lawson were aware of my new title as well.

Thinking about T’Soni’s search for a Cerberus created clone for Shepard led me ask, “Liara, would I be correct in assuming that, when you and Garrus were on Cronos Station, you downloaded all of the information concerning Jack Harper and the operations in which Cerberus was involved … up to the time the Alliance Navy assisted Shepard and her squad in taking control of the station and securing the Prothean VI?”

Liara momentarily ducked her head in thought; looking back up, she softly replied, “Your assumption is correct, Sammy … I had Iringù-Eßizkur download every last bit of data concerning Cerberus operations … galaxy-wide; I regret never having the time needed to look at everything she obtained, but it’s all still archived within Iringù-Eßizkur’s memory core. Why do you? …”

“Thanks to our conversation,” I interrupted, “I just realized I need to research all of Harper’s communications with Alliance personnel … particularly his comms with Sutton … and his comms with Admiral Owen Fletcher, the miserable húndàn [混蛋 - asshole] that gave me up to Michael Moser Lang. Fletcher was sucking at the credit teat of Cerberus and the goddamned Illusive Man. He used his rank to steamroll the other top brass into allowing the destruction of the MSV Anixara, and he was the driving force that convinced senior staff to terminate our Ø7 program.”

After all this time, the destruction of the turian ship still felt like a personal failure to me. “It’s obvious he was only working with the Illusive Man for the creds. Ultimately, he didn’t have the bollocks to stand for his crimes, choosing to eat a bullet instead. I need to find Harper’s and Sutton’s comms records … the records of their conversations concerning me. Having certifiably genuine copies of their comms from Cerberus and the Alliance should be more than enough to bring Sutton down.”

Liara nodded, then said something that really surprised me. “Once you have located the Cerberus records of Harper’s and Sutton’s treacherous machinations, give them to Shepard, along with the records from the Alliance. Spectres are not required to divulge their sources. I don’t believe Rachaël will kill the Lieutenant Commander, but proof that he was working hand-in-hand with Cerberus, along with all the other sabotage perpetrated by him for their benefit, should be enough for the Systems Alliance to charge him with treason.”

“You’re right … if I want to see him brought down, it will have to be because he was working for the Illusive Man from the time Arcturus Station was completed. And what if he were to get off, Liara? A slick attorney—paid for by the Alliance, for craps sake—may be able to get any and all charges dismissed. And unfortunately, revealing his discussion with Jack Harper about murdering me will only expose me to scrutiny I don’t need.

“There is that possibility, but consider … the negative publicity alone will most likely ruin him. An Alliance officer? … clandestinely doing business with an avowed terrorist organization such as Cerberus? … especially in the years right before the war. He managed to get transferred to the
human diplomatic mission on the Citadel; is it not likely he continued to work for the Illusive Man
during the entire war? Goddess! He was probably involved in the coup attempt with Udina!” The
asari paused, thinking about Sutton’s deceitful past. It wasn’t difficult for me to guess the
direction in which her thoughts were sending her. Riveting me with an intense gaze, she said, “I
would expect that being disgraced in this manner would force him to resign from the Navy.”

She fell silent again just before someone first knocked, then slowly opened the door. Shepard
stuck her head in just enough to look at Liara. “Mr Buchanan wants to know if he may join you.”

We both stood up as she softly replied, “Yes, Ionúin álainn … please, come in … both of you.”
Turning to me, she indicated the papers on the table with a small wave of her hand, saying, “I
believe the rest of our discussion can be accomplished more comfortably while sitting in the
chairs.” Including Griff as she waved her hand, she added, “Please?”

AN: My gratitude to Desert Sunrise for allowing me to use several of the asari characters she has
taken great pains to create and nurture within the series, Chronicles of Samantha Shepard. As
I’ve previously stated, Desert Sunrise’s galaxy is not the same as mine - think of it as existing in a
parallel universe. Where it concerns the asari, however, we are both very much of one mind. I
hope you continue to enjoy the tale I’m crafting with D.S.’s assistance.
If you think the value of a woman is only in the curve of her hips and the shape of her breasts, you do not understand how to read beneath her jagged lines, the sacred geometry that make up her glorious heart and her beautiful mind. – Nikita Gill

Ionúin álainn – beautiful beloved (Gaelic)

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

Qíngfū – [情夫 – lover] (Mandarin)

Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Griff followed behind Shepard and eased his large frame into one of the upholstered chairs. I sat in the chair to his left—placing my back squarely towards the expansive view through the windows—while Liara and Shepard sat close together on the massive couch.

“I am not sure how much more we have to discuss, Liara. You’ve made your opinions about my new position crystal clear, and—much to my surprise—I find I am in agreement with everything you explained to me.” I reached for and grasped Buchanan’s left hand while gazing into a pair of caring, grey-green eyes. “During our trip back to the Citadel, I’ll share everything we discussed with my partner.” Giving his hand a quick squeeze, I released it while glancing between Liara and Shepard.

Liara looked intently at Griff. “I need to be sure you understand your position as Ms Traynor’s partner, Mr Buchanan.” With a smirk, she continued, “On occasion, it will be incumbent on you to keep Sammy’s more … headstrong … tendencies in check.”

Eyebrows raised in surprise, Griff glanced at me for a moment before solemnly replying, “Not sure just how I would be able to stop her from doing something once her mind is made up. To be honest? … she scares the living hell out of me, Ma’am. I believe a krogan battlemaster would require assistance to physically stop her. I watched her take down a group of fifteen or sixteen batarians on Cartagena Station in less than two minutes, mainly with her fists and feet. In combination with the blades she usually has available?” He shook his head as he looked at me. “A single person with no martial arts training doesn’t stand a chance against her, Lady Liara.”

The asari’s chuckle held little mirth. “I can sympathize, Griff, truly. I was once the unfortunate recipient of her two-punch combo … broke my nose, my front teeth, dislocated my jaw … I even had black eyes, for Goddess sake.” I ducked my head in embarrassed shame as Shepard took her hand and kissed her knuckles and fingers … injured before I hit her, when the sucker punch she was aiming at the back of my head missed and struck Edie square in her left eye.

“There’s a difference in your relationship,” she continued. “… A relationship we did not enjoy back then. She loves you, Mr Buchanan. I do not believe she would attempt to hurt you in order to do anything not in her best interests … or the best interests of the Shadow Broker.”

Griff looked surprised by her words, then admitted, “She has told me she loves me, Ma’am … just not in the same way she loves Xiülán.”
“You're my friend, Griff … and my partner.” With a smirk, I declared, “I wouldn’t hurt a friend … not intentionally, anyway.” Looking back to Liara, I said, “I can promise I will honestly listen to whatever advice he offers me, Liara. I sought him out because we always worked so well together; any disagreements we may have will not jeopardize our relationship … I won’t permit it. I have few enough friends in this life, so … we’ll work things out and come to a mutual understanding.”

Liara and Rachael both chuckled at that, with Rachael saying, “We’re going to hold you to that, Sammy. There is too much at stake … for both of you. You must keep your attitude in check.” She paused, looked at Liara and gave her a chaste kiss; when she returned her gaze to me, it was to take up an entirely different topic. “Sammy, you said you’d be returning to the Citadel. For the sake of your security … and your anonymity … I would suggest that you consider relocating to somewhere … a bit more isolated.”

Liara took up the explanation, as if she’d already been discussing the subject with her bondmate. “The Broker apartment above that asari business in Bravo Ward was never intended as a long-term home for you, Sammy. Secure as it may seem, it is simply too exposed for you to make it your permanent base of operations, and having Iringu-Elbizkur more-or-less permanently docked nearby is even more of a dead giveaway … to your location, and ultimately … your profession. You would be wise to consider a move … sooner, rather than later.”

Griff was nodding his head as she stopped talking. “I’ve been thinking the same thing, Spectre … Lady Liara.” He glanced at me as he added, “With everything that’s been going on these past weeks, I had not given voice to those thoughts, as it would have diverted our attention from necessary research. That said, I can certainly see the validity of your observation. Do either of you have somewhere in mind? … someplace not too far removed from civilization?”

Liara stood; cupping her elbows in her hands, she slowly walked to the table, where she turned and leaned against its edge. “Time,” she said. “It’s always about time, isn’t it? How little of this precious commodity we have available to us?” With a chuckle, she added, “I do believe the Cerberus archives within Iringu-Elbizkur will reveal two, maybe three small space stations in obscure systems … systems with little to attract the attention of those looking to exploit available natural resources. I suggest that you devote at least some of your waking hours to researching them, Mr Buchanan.”

“Do you really believe they’ve been abandoned, Liara?” Griff shook his head slightly in denial. “It’s hard to imagine a group of people so rabidly adhering to the beliefs of the Illusive Man that they would simply leave such facilities behind.”

Shepard’s eyes took on a haunted look as she softly replied, “The Illusive Man was indoctrinated, Griff. It was all I could do to … convince him … that he was doing exactly what the Reapers required of him, even if he didn’t want to admit it to himself. He chose to end his life, rather than continue as their pawn.” Glancing momentarily at Liara, she continued, “With him dead, there was no compelling reason, or credits, for those working at the smaller research facilities to continue.”

I asked, “Wouldn’t they have destroyed the facilities when they left, rather than allow the Alliance or other races to use what was left behind?”

Liara chuckled. “Some may have destroyed everything on their way out, but once you have a couple of facility locations, send a request to Harbinger … ask if there are any Repositories close by that can investigate, or have Iringu-Elbizkur fly you there … check them out for yourself.”

“Were all of the stations huge? … like Minuteman?”

“Not at all, Sammy,” Rachael replied. “Jack Harper kept the various directions of his research
grouped into cells in order to prevent any one group from knowing what the rest were doing. The facilities didn’t all have to be huge … in most cases, smaller was better. They drew less attention that way.”

Nodding slowly, I replied, “I’ve been increasingly worried that Iringù-Eßizkur’s presence in a civilian sector of Bravo Ward will come to the attention of C-Sec, forcing a relocation before we’re ready to move.” I looked to Griff, who nodded in agreement. “We will do as you both suggest … relocate to someplace a bit more … isolated. I hate having to always be looking over my shoulder on the Citadel.”

I leaned back into the soft embrace of the upholstery, crossed left leg over right knee and changed the subject. Looking directly at Shepard, I said, “I do need to ask a favor of you, however … in your capacity as a Council Spectre.” With Rachaél now waiting expectantly, I continued, “Liara has suggested I involve you in … my own personal business.”

I hesitated for a moment, prompting her to offer quiet encouragement. “There are only two answers I can give you, Sammy … yes, or no. So, what do you need from me?”

I took a deep breath and forged ahead, offering the same story concerning Admiral Owen Fletcher and Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton I had just shared with Liara. “I want to see Sutton’s cushy job on the Citadel yanked out from under him … I’ve already told Liara I want to see him die in the most painful way possible, but … after our discussion, I now believe the most agonizing future for the son of a drooling whore would be the very public exposure of his collusion with Cerberus, along with forfeiture of his illicitly gained fortune to the Alliance’s widows and orphans fund.”

“You have proof he was taking creds from Jack Harper?” Just thinking that Sutton might be dirty had the Spectre’s undivided attention.

“I’ll be looking through the records retrieved from Cronos Station by Iringù-Eßizkur, Shepard; she has the entirety of the Illusive Man’s personal logs stored in her memory core. I’ll find all the proof you will need to bring him up on charges.” After looking down for a moment, I returned my gaze to her icy-green eyes. “My only regret will be that he won’t know he has been brought down by me; I really would like to be standing right in front of him in order to stick a blade in his gut and twist it.”

Shepard’s smile was grim. “I am really sorry he placed a black mark in your jacket, Sammy. Do you happen to know if Lieutenant Kelsey Winters somehow survived the destruction of Arcturus Station?”

“I do not … haven’t actually looked, since it’s assumed that everyone on that station was spaced when the Reapers destroyed it on their way to Earth. If she did manage to somehow survive the devastation, she’s doing an excellent job of remaining unnoticed.”

Shepard chuckled. “Let me know what you uncover concerning her ultimate fate, Samantha. If I had to guess, I’d expect she’d turn up as a mere, perhaps in the Blue Suns, or maybe CAT6. I sincerely doubt she’d be able to remain in the Alliance for long without the backing of Cerberus.”

I smiled by way of reply, then abruptly changed the subject yet again. “Would it be possible to borrow a shuttlecraft for a trip to Serrice, Liara?” I smirked as I explained, “I could easily travel there within Iringù-Eßizkur, but having her land there would run the risk of triggering a panic among the inhabitants, and the distance is a bit too great to easily travel there in an aircar.”

Liara exchanged a look with Rachaél before asking, “What do you need in Serrice, Sammy?”
With a small grin, I replied, “I need to visit Serrice Council Manufacturing in order to acquire a new omnitool for my partner.” I looked at Griff again as I continued, “His is a model six Logic Arrest tool from Ariake Technologies; he’s had it since before the war. I want him to have a Savant model X-plus like mine … and, I need to make sure the software for my own tool is up to date.”

Rachaél had nodded slowly as I finished explaining. “That makes sense, Sammy … but, you must realize those tools are incredibly expensive.”

I grinned as I replied, “My own tool has saved my ass on a number of occasions; Xiülán has used hers to great effect numerous times as well. I realize that having them gifted to us through our participation in the Alliance SpecOps school was extremely good fortune, and I will probably be unhappy to learn just how many credits I’m wearing on my arm. That said, Griff needs a new, upgraded omnitool, and Serrice Council omnitools are the best of the best.”

Liara nodded in agreement. “I’ll loan you a shuttle and a pilot, Sammy. Do you think you’ll need to stay overnight once you’re there, or can you handle your business in a single day?”

“I’d like to have everything done by this evening, Liara. But, should circumstances dictate, is there somewhere in Serrice either of you can recommend?”

“That’s why I asked,” She replied with a smile. Typing on her omnitool interface, she added, “I still have an apartment there from my doctorate days; I kept it simply for the convenience of having my own place to stay whenever I traveled to the city. I’ve just sent you the address and entry code.” She closed the interface and looked up. “Is there someone in particular at Serrice Council you need to contact?”

I didn’t have to think about my answer. “Mallene Calis. She was at our first omnitool classes on Luna, and we managed to provide her some assistance after Heather’s murder on Mars. I just hope she survived the damned war.”

Rachaél stood and motioned for me to accompany her. “Let’s go make some calls. I can use my status as a council Spectre to assist you, and you won’t have to reveal your current affiliation.”

As I stood to accompany Rachaél, Liara looked at Griff, saying, “Mr Buchanan, perhaps you would reintroduce me to Iringü-Eßizkur. Someone needs to be monitoring all the data retrieval being performed by the Shadow Broker; I am quite capable of performing that task in your absence … and, I could also begin searching the database for Fletcher’s and Sutton’s conversations with Harper.”

I had turned as Liara was speaking. “Are you sure you wish to reenter Irin, Liara?”

She frowned as she walked towards me. “No, actually, I would rather not … but, the network of agents relies on uninterrupted access to the Broker. Someone must be available to answer inquiries as they are received.” She cocked her head, saying in a serious tone, “I trust neither of you are using the network for personal gain.”

I grinned at her statement. “You already know about my research on Garrett Sutton, and our search for the credit trails linked to the batarian Ugrolya Rarfenak. We are not performing any research that we cannot share with you, Liara.” Pausing to think about having her as our substitute for a day … maybe two, I added, “As a matter of fact, perhaps having you personally inspect what we’ve been doing since I left the Alliance will help convince you of the integrity of our work.”

I paused to think about her lack of desire to revisit Irin, finally concluding with, “Also, seeing as
you are disinclined to enter Iringù-Eßizkur once again, perhaps you would allow me to accompany you to your secure communications center. Knowing the level of system security you likely already have in place, I can’t imagine it taking more than a few minutes work to link one or two of your servers to the comms gear within Irin’s research area … in that way, you’ll be able to monitor all the feeds from the comfort of your home.”

Liara sighed with relief at my suggestion, even as she blushed slightly at my veiled accusation. “That would be positively wonderful, Sammy. I must admit, that would be much more acceptable to me. Thinking of those days doesn’t exactly bring up the best of memories … though, the ending made it all worth it.” She gazed lovingly into the eyes of her Siame for a long moment before turning back to me. “Surely, you must realize that Shepard and I fully understand the sacrifice you chose to make, Sammy … as we weighed relatively the same options once I had Rachael back in physical form.” She glanced again at her bondmate and added, “We simply chose … differently.”

She stepped closer and took my hand, squeezing it slightly as she attempted to better explain her concerns. “And, just so you know, I have never doubted your integrity, Samantha … your choice to resign from the Alliance in order to keep them from controlling you? … from using the network to benefit only them? That single act alone proved you were above their petty manipulations.”

Meeting my eyes once more, she sighed. “Our true concern is your tendency to act on impulse, rather than well thought out reasoning … that you have the potential to do something in the heat of the moment that, as the Shadow Broker, you would never be able to undo, such as breaking my jaw, only on a much, much larger scale.”

I cringed slightly and ducked my head in embarrassed shame at the memory from that time, even as Shepard added, “Which is why I needed to speak with Griff… because he needs to perform the same role I filled for Liara.” She glanced at her ionúin álaimn before continuing, “The Brokerage carries a great deal of temptation with it … and I have frequently acted as Liara’s sounding board … her conscience.” Her glance then shifted to Buchanan. “And, after speaking with him about that role and observing how the two of you interact, I am convinced that he is quite capable of doing so, even if Griff doesn’t quite believe it, himself.”

Liara raised a brow marking at Shepard’s revelation. “That is excellent news indeed, Siame.” She then turned to me, a twinkle in her eye. “Take your trip to Serrice. It seems that when you return, we may have yet more to discuss.”

♦ SERRICE COUNCIL MANUFACTURING, SERRICE · THESSIA ♦

It was late afternoon when we walked into the visitor center at Serrice Council Manufacturing. “Samantha Traynor!” Hearing my name loudly spoken in this place was a surprise; I looked around quickly and spotted Mallene Calis striding across the floor towards me. “The Goddess has graced your life with good fortune!” The asari placed her hands on top of mine for a moment before reaching in to embrace me as if I were a long-lost sister; there was a hint of excess moisture in her eyes as she pushed back while maintaining her grip on my forearms.

“And now the Goddess has blessed me as well. It is so very good to learn that you survived the war … when news reached us that Normandy was missing, I feared the worst … for her captain, her crew … but for you in particular!” Releasing her grip on my arms, she turned towards Buchanan as she said, “Please, introduce me to your companion.”

“This is my associate … and my dear friend, Griffen Buchanan … Griff, Mallene Calis.” He greeted her with hands out, palms up … to which she responded in the traditional manner.
“Mr Buchanan … a pleasure.” Turning back to me, she said, “An associate? I presume the association is a business arrangement; I must admit to being surprised that Spectre Shepard would call me from the T’Soni estate to explain you and Mr Buchanan needed to purchase omnitools from my company.” Pausing for a moment, she asked me, “And what of your Siame from the SpecOps program? … Yuán Xiùlán? I seriously doubt that you would abandon her.”

“Xiùlán? … your assumption is correct, Mallene. She is still the center of my personal universe; that will never change.” With a hint of the pride I felt for my Qíngfū, I added, “She’s the captain of an Alliance frigate – the SSV Hong Kong.”

“Captain, you say? The Goddess has blessed her, then, just as she has blessed you.” With a small smile, Mallene invited us to take a seat in her neatly furnished office as she asked, “And what of you, Samantha? … what are you involved in these days?”

“Our passions led us in different directions, professionally. My own path led me to leave the Alliance military in favor of working in the private sector. Buchanan and I do a bit of work for Spectre Shepard; she sees the need for proper equipment, so sent us here to see you. As for Griff, he has been my associate for a long time … prior to the war, after the completion of my SpecOps training program, and again, since the recovery of Normandy.”

I was sure the asari noticed that I had adroitly side-stepped her question … and was thankful she chose to ignore that omission … for now. “Ah, yes. Spectre Shepard did say you wished to update the software on your device, and that you wished to purchase a Savant X-plus for Mr Buchanan.” Momentarily looking down, she said, “We can certainly supply an X-plus for Mr Buchanan, but it will be … rather expensive. Additionally, your current omnitool does not have the required interface hardware to accept our current software upgrades, Sammy, so will need to be replaced with a new one as well.”

I smiled as I held my own wrist out. “Matron Calis, I realize, better than most, just how expensive these omnitools are.” Looking at Griff, I added, “There have been times in the past in which Griff was my only backup, and I’m sure similar situations will occur in the future. As such, he needs the best tools to see our task—whatever it may be—to a safe conclusion.”

“What is the make and model of his current omnitool?” she inquired.

“Ariake Technologies, Logic Arrest model six, from before the war. The software is sadly out of date, and rather than pay for an upgrade for that tool, I felt we would be better served if he was wearing an X-plus like mine.”

“Hhmm.” She drummed her fingertips on her desk for a moment; coming to a decision, she opened her own omnitool. After making several entries, a still photo of several male-oriented bracelets—or cuffs—was displayed on a small viewer, which she turned for Griff to inspect. “Make a selection from one of these, Mr Buchanan.”

Returning her attention to me, she said, “Fortunately, we still manufacture a model quite similar in appearance to your current tool, Sammy, and I will apply a professional discount for both of your new omnitools. That you returned to see me for this is no small thing. There is little more precious than loyalty, as I am sure you must be aware.” Smiling broadly, she added, “I would never have guessed that—at our meeting in early 2179—you would be sitting in my office today.”

I inclined my head slightly in respect as I replied, “I thank you for that, Mallene. Buchanan having access to the latest from Serrice Council will greatly benefit both of us.”

Mallene leaned back in her chair. Clasping her hands together on the edge of the desk, she said,
“The significance—for both of you—will be greater than you know, Ms Traynor. I believe you will benefit tremendously from the upgraded replacement. The new tools for each of you will be fully accessible … by simply using your minds.”

It took a great deal of effort for me to remain calm while I asked in near disbelief, “How is that possible? Will the tools have to be wired into our nervous systems?”

The asari held her hands up in a mute plea for patience. “Commander Shepard’s choice of synthesis for machines and organics has proven to be a huge benefit for those few that are privileged to have our current Savant model 10-plus omnitools in their possession. The software works with the synthetic nanoparticles attached to our DNA, rendering our minds capable of directly interfacing with our omnitools.” Looking at the device on my wrist, she added, “It will no longer be necessary for you activate your omnitool by touching that bio-sensitive cabochon.”

Griff looked skeptical. “Matron Calis, will all the functions of the tool be available in that manner?” He looked at me apologetically. “I mean, what would happen if Sammy lost her temper? Would the tool automatically activate in full combat mode?”

Mallene smiled at his question. “I should clarify. In order to initiate combat mode, she … and you … will need to tap the activation jewel atop the bracelet or cuff.” Returning her attention to me, she added, “This is not much different from the way you activate the tool today, Ms Traynor. As an example, you will be able to simply think about hacking a lock or computer or a smart-circuit for the tool to self-activate in the correct mode; touching the cabochon while the tool is still active will change it to combat mode.”

“Sounds like we’ll both need to perform some simulations to become attuned to this improved interface.” I looked at the bracelet on my wrist with a newfound appreciation for the technical marvel I had been wearing since 2179. In a thoughtful tone, I murmured, “With the exception of the firmware updates done on Mars, and an incident on the Normandy during its return trip from the outer rim, I haven’t removed this bracelet since I first put it on.”

“That is as it should be, Ms Traynor. In that way, it is always available for your use; removing it from your arm is never a good idea.”

Buchanan discreetly cleared his throat to gain my attention. “What of this design, Sammy?”

Mallene and I both looked at the design on the monitor; it was a 2.5-centimeter-wide, endless platinum band with an ornate sword cutout pattern on top, surrounding a contrasting circular ring that framed a polished actinolite ‘cat’s eye’ in a brilliant shade of green. I directed my question to Mallene. “Touching the gem activates the tool?”

Mallene nodded, saying, “Just as the cabochon on your own tool.” Looking at Griff, she commented, “That’s one of our more expensive interfaces, Mr Buchanan. It is very similar to a bonding bracelet, in that it is forged with a trace amount of eezo around the inner circumference. Once in place and activated, it will physically shrink to a comfortable fit. The only way to safely remove it afterwards will be either for you to travel here or visit one of our stores on the Citadel or on Illium, in order for one of our technicians to expand it to its original diameter.”

Griff looked at me; it was obvious he was seeking my approval. “Griff, you’re the one that will be wearing this … probably for a very long time. It has a very masculine appearance, much more so than your current omnitool.” With a smirk, I added, “It looks as if it was designed for you and no one else … I think you should have it.”

With a wide grin, he turned towards the asari as he said, “That’s the one for me, Ma’am.”
Mallene showed her teeth in a brief grin. “Since this omnitool will not be removable, on which wrist would you desire to wear it, Mr Buchanan?”

Mutely bringing up his right hand; he then watched as she grasped that hand, activated her own tool and scanned his rather large wrist. When she was done, she entered several commands before closing the tool and turning towards both of us. “It will be ready for you tomorrow mid-morning, Mr Buchanan.” Looking at me, she added, “Samantha, please follow me. I will take you to meet Luria T’Gabri, our chief programmer. She’ll transfer your omnitool’s current settings to its replacement. While we walk, please backup whatever you feel is important to your personal extranet account.”

She continued to speak as we left her office and proceeded down a wide passageway, flanked on both sides with large windows, through which we could see numerous asari involved in fabricating and finishing the more ornate bracelets intended for the well-heeled clientele that were Serrice Industries primary customers. “Once Luria programs your new omnitool and it is comfortably settled on your wrist, you will be hard-pressed to see any differences, either in its appearance or operation, except … its response time to your mental commands will be nearly instantaneous.”

As we walked, I asked Griff, “Since your new omnitool won’t be ready until tomorrow, would you rather stay in Serrice tonight, or should we request that Spectre Shepard send a shuttle?”

Mallene overheard me; she stopped at an access hatch, turned towards me and offered, “You are both welcome to stay in our guest quarters tonight, Sammy. It’s just another part of our service to important customers such as yourselves.”

Griff glanced at me before answering for both of us. “Your hospitality is most welcome, Ms Calis … Mallene, but the possibility of spending the night here was discussed before we left Armali; we have the use of an apartment near the university. We’ll rent an aircar for the ride there and back in the morning, so we don’t have to make the roundtrip flight to Armali and back … it’ll allow Sammy more time to begin learning how to use her upgraded omnitool.”

“Most excellent, Griff.” With a wide grin, she said, “With that settled, you both must join me for dinner after we are done for the day.”

After introducing both of us to Matron T’Gabri, Mallene announced, “As it will take some time for you to be fitted and transfer files from your old omnitool, I’ll give Mr Buchanan a tour of our facility, Sammy. We’ll return just before dinnertime.”

Luria T’Gabri was slightly shorter than most asari I had met; the top of her crest was about level with my eyes. She had a pale complexion, tending towards a rich amethyst. Her eyes were quite striking, with the left one a rich shade of silver flecked amber, while her right eye was a brilliant shade of green.

Having greeted me in the traditional manner, Luria said, “Please remove your bracelet for me, Ms Traynor.” I eased the omnitool over my hand; my reluctance to part with it must have shown in my expression, causing T’Gabri to hold her own wrist up as she commented, “I fully understand your reluctance to remove it, Ms Traynor. After living with it on your arm for so much time, it almost becomes a part of your body.”

“Please, call me Sammy.” With a grim smile, I replied as I handed her the device, “I feel as if I’m now standing here completely naked, Matron T’Gabri. Unless I am using it, I never pay any attention to it … haven’t for a long time, but I truly miss the weight, slight as it is.”
Luria set the bracelet in a receptacle next to a similar fixture holding a new omnitool of similar design. Having already setup for the files and functions transfer, she turned to the haptic interface and initiated the process; this brought forth the familiar, purple-tinged ultraviolet glow from both omnitools as they came to life, with the replacement omnitool receiving all of my saved files and the applications and weapons with which I was familiar. As this new omnitool already had the latest program upgrades, the file and application transfer progressed quickly.

In less than a minute, the glow faded away from both tools, prompting the asari to use a gloved hand to gingerly retrieve my new bracelet. As she handed it to me, she said, “Everything installed on your previous omnitool is now installed on this one, Sammy. When you settle this on your wrist, you may notice a slight tingling where the metal touches your skin; this will fade as your body attunes itself to this new interface. When you are ready, I will activate the self-adjustment feature, allowing it to shrink slightly in diameter so it can no longer be removed.”

I slid the bracelet over my hand and settled it back in its usual place on my wrist; within seconds, the slight sensation of … not quite an itch … a feeling akin to what I perceived as the hair on my arm standing on end began … and just as quickly ended, as the new omnitool established its permanent link with my nervous system. I turned my attention back to Luria with a questioning look, saying, “I believe it has established its connection.”

The asari technician smiled. “Good. I will activate its core.” She could see I was nervous about this part of the process and added, “It will not remove your hand, Ms Traynor; that function is electronic. Not only is this bracelet linked to your nervous system, it is now inextricably tied to your DNA, just as your previous bracelet was. Having it slightly shrink in diameter is a physical reaction of the eezo within the metal bracelet.” I observed with fascination as Luria activated a different haptic interface. “Please place your arm in the scanner, Sammy.”

I did as she directed; I actually thought of screaming my head off in perceived agony as a prank, but decided to maintain a professional persona. It is so damned tempting! The omnitool slowly reacted to the stimulus from the machine, shrinking in diameter to a point where I could get the first joint of my little finger under the new band … I could almost spin the platinum bracelet around on my wrist… but attempting to remove it now was futile. Guess I’m bonded to it now, came the snarky thought. If someone wished to steal it, they’d have to chop off my hand.

Moving to stand right in front of me, Luria said, “I will now demonstrate the most simple of its many upgrades.” I watched in rapt awe as she placed her forearm in front of her chest; without her having to physically touch it, the omnitool on her wrist activated and began generating a string of text. Upon completing its task, its glow dimmed slightly, then winked out; as Luria’s omnitool deactivated, my own tool came to life with an extremely low-volume chime, to be instantly followed by receipt of a short text message.

“That’s quite remarkable, Luria, but …” I looked at the message she had sent me. “… the text appears to be Thessian, a language I can neither read nor speak.”

“It was transmitted in Thessian because that is how I think, Sammy. And, are you sure you cannot read that message? Take another look … it will auto-translate into Galactic Standard.”

I did as she suggested; in shocked amazement I watched the message resolve itself into Galactic Standard text: “This is a test of the direct link my mind has with my omnitool.” My own tool’s haptic interface faded as the tool deactivated; once again returning my attention to the asari, I said, “I never imagined that replacing my omnitool would result in my having to completely relearn its use, Luria.”

With a brief smile, the asari replied, “Once you become familiar with this method of interfacing, it
will be as if it had always been so for you, Sammy. The only function that will still require physical activation is combat mode. Once activated, simply thinking of whichever tool you wish to use … the several omni-blades, the … throwing stars?—now those I want to see!—and your directed electronic overloads … will be available with the speed of thought."

“Will Buchanan’s new tool have the same functionality?”

“Of course. There’d really be no point in providing him with an omnitool less capable than the one on your own wrist. Once familiar with them, I believe you will both be very pleased with their ease of operation. Of course, non-combat functions can still be accessed by touch.” After a brief pause, she added, “Additionally, there will be no need for you to switch between the electronic hacking functions and the combat profile. As an example, hacking a locked hatch will no longer require disabling the tool’s combat mode; this will provide a slight, but significant advantage; should you be in pursuit of a dangerous person or persons, a door that suddenly opens after being hacked won’t find you still re-enabling the tool’s combat profile.”

“That’s a good thing, Luria,” I replied with a smirk. “A very good thing. I can think of a recent … excursion … where that exact scenario played out. Every time I came to an electronically locked hatch or door, I had to switch between the two modes as I progressed. This will be a definite performance improvement!”

The asari ushered me into a large compartment with a number of challenges set up; I spent the next 90-plus minutes testing my omnitool’s upgraded functionality. The more I used its ability to hack smart-circuits, along with anything and everything processor-controlled, the easier it became. By the end of my time in the exercise facility, my confidence in simply using my thoughts to command my omnitool to do everything I had formerly done manually had increased to the point I could no longer imagine having to input commands by hand.

Luria reminded me she wished to observe the throwing stars. I tossed two of the flash-forged multiple-blade weapons at a blank, fabric-covered wall from eight meters away; a blade from each star pierced and stuck in the wall. As we walked up to inspect the damage, I cautioned her, “The edges are sharper than the knives a chef might employ to filet a fish, and they’re coated with an extremely potent neurotoxin; caution must be used in removing them from that wall … or whatever … or whomever … they’re imbedded in.”

“I have never seen anything like this, Sammy … certainly not generated by an omnitool, from any manufactory.” She paused for a moment of thought, then said, “These appear to be quite similar to Asari Songblades in appearance … do you know of them?”

*I’m not going to tell you how I know of them, but …* I grinned as I responded, “I actually saw a pair, several years ago … before the Reaper War.” Indicating the blades I had just thrown, I added, “These are a variation on ancient weapons once employed by humans … Japanese warriors on my homeworld; theirs were fashioned from steel and had to be carried in a leather pouch, and I don’t believe the edges were nearly as sharp as these.”

The doors behind me slid open to admit Mallene Calis, accompanied by Griff, who asked, “Nearly done here, Sammy?”

I smiled up at him, saying, “This new omnitool is amazing, Griff … and yes, we are about done, but I will definitely need to add exercises with this into my daily routine.”

With a huge grin, he observed, “I know how much you like technical toys, Sammy, and that bracelet on your wrist? It’s no toy, but it certainly is an electronic marvel.”
Mallene addressed both of us. “It is growing late. If you would accompany me, I will escort you to a small restaurant for dinner, after which you can travel to your apartment for the evening.”

With a smile and nod of my head, I replied, “Please … lead the way.”
Plans For Leaving The Citadel

Defined by no man, you are your own story, blazing through the world, turning history into herstory. And when they dare to tell you about all the things you cannot be, you smile and tell them, “I am both war and woman, and you cannot stop me” — Nikita Gill

Ai’ a me – a trusted friend and unquestioned ally (Source: CDN)
GST – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space
Húdié dāo – [蝴蝶刀 – butterfly sword] (knife in English)
Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Ionúin álainn – beautiful beloved (Gaelic)
Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’
Liūdyè 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.
NDA – Non-Disclosure Agreement, signed by Yuán and Traynor at termination of the Ø7 program
Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.
The Ø designates covert operations, while the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.
Qíngfū – [情夫 – lover]
Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ AT LARGE, SERRICE · THESSIA ♦

My new omnitool had awakened me at 0550; having anticipated staying away from the T’Soni estate for only one evening, I had left my exercise equipment within Iringù-Eßizkur. After relieving myself and splashing some water on my face, I sat on the edge of the bed and checked my messages. I was still somewhat in awe of my upgraded omnitool. Simply thinking about my messages activated the interface and brought up the oldest note.

After reading and archiving all of my unread documents, I composed and sent a short note to Xiùlán, but didn’t tell her where I had spent yesterday and the previous evening. Shepard’s and Liara’s paranoia concerning my security must be sinking in. Being cautious will keep me alive. Being cautious … will keep Xiùlán alive. Damn! I am really beginning to hate the necessity of having to live like this!

With a thought I closed the interface without sending the message to my Inamorata … I’d send it once I was back inside the security of Iringù-Eßizkur’s structure; I stood from my perch and returned to the bathroom, there to take a warm shower. After toweling myself off, I dressed and left the room, intent on finding a place to have some breakfast … and some Kaffe. As I drew abreast of the next doorway along the short hall, Buchanan nearly bowled me over as he exited his own room. Grabbing my shoulders to steady me, he said, “Ooops! Sorry, Sammy … didn’t mean to run over you.”

“No harm done,” I grinned up at him as I recovered my balance; he fell in step with me when I resumed walking towards the main entry. “I’m looking to find some coffee or Kaffe, Griff. As
soon as you have your new omnitool, I want to contact the estate … see how fast we can get a shuttle to retrieve us.” I looked around quickly in an attempt to make sure everything was as it was when we had arrived the previous evening. Looking up at Buchanan, I said, “Let’s go.”

Once outside Liara’s comfortable apartment, I inspected the area around us. “This is a nice little neighborhood, Griff … lots tidier than the area around Oxford, and that isn’t nearly as old as here. Are asari simply tidier people than humans?” I used my omnitool to hail a rental aircar so we could return to Serrice Industries. “We’ll get breakfast in their company cafeteria, Griff.”

♦ SERRICE COUNCIL MANUFACTURING, SERRICE · THESSIA ♦

It was a twenty-minute ride back to Serrice Industries. Once inside the reception lobby, I led the way towards the sounds and smells of breakfast, then paused at the doorway leading to the company cafeteria to gauge the size of the crowd. “Now that we have some direction from T'Soni, I really want to find a hidden location in which to do our work. Sad to say, but I’ve grown complacent, Griff … something I once accused you of; it’s exactly how the Broker previous to Liara met his own end, after personally initiating a plot to have her murdered on Illium.”

“I think we have a bit of time yet, Sammy.” We walked through the door as he continued, “I don’t believe we have been at this long enough for anyone to recognize us as a target.”

I gratefully accepted a full mug of Kaffee from the maiden behind the counter. Sipping in appreciation, I filled a plate with several varieties of native fruit, added a bowl of hot cereal—an asari equivalent of oatmeal—and moved to an isolated table. In opposition to my dark mood, I kept my voice light as I said, “Liara started an itch in the middle of my back, Griff. I think the only way to scratch it will involve us relocating to a new home … off the damned Citadel.”

I fell silent as I began eating, all the while thinking of how our lives had changed since my decision to leave the Alliance. Swallowing a bit of fruit, I said, “Dammit to ‘ell and back, Griff! Sometimes, I really hate this situation! … I can’t even send a damned note to Xiùlán without worrying that some sonuvabitch will intercept the message and simultaneously track it to her and back to me.”

Buchanan tipped his head slightly in acknowledgement as he took a bite from a sweet roll; he followed this with a couple of swallows from his own mug of Kaffee before replying in a thoughtful tone, “Where do you think we should go, Sammy? I know there’s a lot of empty vacuum out there, but I think wherever we go, we need to stay relatively close to a Mass Relay and a comm buoy.” After another swallow from his mug, he worriedly asked, “You’re not thinking of living full-time inside Iringû-Eßizkur while she moves around the galaxy, are you?”

Shaking my head, I responded with, “Wouldn’t be that much better for us than living aboard Spirit’s Rage, and Irin is a sentient being … I’m not really sure how much longer we can impose on her charity. It’s a discussion we need to have with her … soon.” I took a bite of what appeared to be melon and chewed. “Our apartment has just the right amount of room … and privacy, for the two of us.” I had been thinking about what we would require as we moved forward. “That said, I believe we do need a bit more space in which to move around, Griff. For instance, I would really love to have a dedicated, equipment filled exercise room.”

Griff replied, “Having all the equipment that was available in the gyms within the Alliance bases where we’ve been assigned? … that would be nice. And how about a dedicated research and comms room? … so we wouldn’t have to work in the same space we use to relax? Oh, and a bigger kitchen, with more space for storage.”
I chuckled as I finished eating; downing the last bit of Kaffe, I added, “Something else we need to think about is security … and I believe I know where we can acquire an inexpensive security force. Just need to visit the remains of Lazarus Station. There are dozens of LOKI mechs sitting in storage there, just waiting for someone to come along and appropriate them.”

“You sure that’s a good idea, Sammy? All the LOKI’s I ever came up against were damned stupid … phenomenally so.”

“They wouldn’t have to win any battles for us, Griff. They’d be a delaying tactic, at best, and the warning they transmit upon encountering an enemy would gain us the time we’d need to employ stronger countermeasures.” I popped the last bite of melon-like-fruit in my mouth, chewed, swallowed and stood from my chair; picking up my tray, I took it and my dishes to the collection area. After waiting for Griff to do the same, I headed for the exit, saying, “It’s just a thought at this point. Let’s go find Mallene Calis … see if your new tool is ready.”

Buchanan and I thanked Mallene profusely for everything she had done for us since our arrival at Serrice Industries the previous afternoon. Griff’s new omnitool was quite literally a work of art on his wrist, its striking design nicely complementing his understated masculinity. That he now owned an omnitool every bit the equal of my own pleased me to no end.

Mallene spoke softly as we clutched each other’s forearms in farewell. “I really cannot thank you enough for coming to see me for your new omnitools, Sammy. Do you think …” She paused, as if not sure she wanted to ask the question that was on her mind.

“Do I think … what, Mallene? You are Ai’a me. If I am able to do so without compromising anything, I will give you an honest answer to whatever question you wish to ask.”

The look of surprise at my declaration was so brief, I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t been watching her carefully. Instantly composed, she said, “This will sound as if I’m a Goddess-be-damned mercenary, interested only in creds, but … I wanted to ask if you thought Ms Yuán would be needing an upgrade for her omnitool as well.”

I responded with a soft laugh before replying, “She’s the captain of an Alliance frigate. After she hears of the upgraded tool now in my possession, she will very much want the same… but, first, she’ll have to persuade her superiors to provide the necessary credits for a replacement.” I released my grip on her arms in order to slide past them; embracing her in a heartfelt hug, I whispered, “Goddess be with you, Mallene.” I pulled back, tipped my head and kissed her on the cheek, then turned towards the doors. Griff offered his thanks and farewell in a more … asari appropriate fashion … then accompanied me outside, where we were greeted by a balmy, sunny afternoon.

With a brief look around us, I said, “I believe I would enjoy living here, Griff. I think I need to research their requirements for becoming a permanent resident.”

Griff prefaced his response with a snort. “Actually, I delved into their residency laws right before I took my medical discharge from the Alliance, Sammy. The asari are quite choosy about aliens—that would be people like us—permanently moving to Thessia from … well, anywhere. That’s why colony worlds such as Illium exist … no restrictions.”

I had to laugh at that. “Illium is just a brightly-lit version of Omega, with a fancy hairdo and lots of lipstick and face-paint, Griff. The reason it’s so attractive to so many races is their laissez-faire attitude towards the economic affairs of the citizens that live there.”

With a chuckle, he replied, “You seem to forget, a lot of people choose to live on Illium, rather
than Omega, because there’s no queen interfering in their lives.”

“I would expect there’s more to it than that, Griff.”

As we strolled towards the shuttle parking area, a lone asari—a commando, by the look of her leathers—moved away from a blue-trimmed shuttlecraft and began walking towards us; I recognized her as the pilot provided for us by Spectre Shepard. When she drew close enough to easily hear me, I greeted her by saying, “Huntress T’Sessi … I’m glad you’re here.”

Irlia smiled in reply, saying, “It is my privilege to provide you with transportation during your stay with us, Ms Traynor … Mr Buchanan. Additionally, it allows me an opportunity to keep my piloting skills sharp.” Waving towards the House T’Soni shuttle, she asked, “Shall we be off?”

Griff and I both smiled and nodded, saying together, “It’ll be good to be back.” I looked at him and murmured, “Are you missing your bed inside Iringù-Eßizkur?”

“If at all, Sammy. The guest bed at the estate is plenty comfortable for me.” With a raised eyebrow, he asked, “Do you think we’ll be staying another night?”

“I honestly don’t know. Depends on whether or not Lady Liara and Spectre Shepard feel we have all our business discussions completed, I guess. If we finish up late, I expect they’ll be averse to us leaving before mid-morning tomorrow.”

A soft voice came from the pilot’s compartment as Irlia brought the shuttle to life. “From what I’ve heard, you will be our guests for another evening.”

“Thanks for the information, Huntress. Staying another night will certainly be our pleasure.” I watched intently out the side view ports as the city of Serrice fell away beneath us … land changing to slate-blue ocean waters as we crossed the coast and traveled southwest in an arc around the coastal waters of Dassus. I sighed as I sat back in my seat and began thinking about my future … our future, together … as the Shadow Broker.

♦

VULPES, SANCTUM · DECORIS SYSTEM, SIGURD’S CRADLE ♦

Zaeed Massani chuckled quietly as he sauntered into The Frozen Husband Tavern; he didn’t know what the frozen counterpart to hell was called—by any race—but it wouldn’t have been any surprise to discover it was named Sanctum … the planet was only a few degrees away from being a completely frozen ball of ice. In all probability, this tavern had been named as such because some woman’s mate had succumbed to the outside temperatures after delaying his return to a warming shelter in order to retrieve just one last bit of ore from his frozen mine.

Massani ordered a glass of beer at the bar, then took the filled pint glass—actually a half-liter capacity glass—to a table in the back. He was bone tired, so propped a foot in the empty chair beside the table as he sat down heavily. Taking a long pull from the glass, he grimaced at the bitter taste of what passed for beer in this place. Aint much better than turian piss, he thought. At least da smell ain’t as bad. He had been frequenting this tavern for six days, all the while researching Caecidia Verinus, the turian female in charge of the Blue Suns outpost on this icy snowball.

It’s as if she knows I’m lookin’ fer her, came the glum thought. Zaeed had been exceedingly careful as he nosed around town. Population at a quarter million … not as if there’s an overwhelming number of people ’ere to start wif.

Vulpes and the surrounding area had undergone a massive financial crash after Jack Harper ate a
bullet on the Citadel. It had been nearly two years since Shepard had put an end to the war; the fallout from her actions then was still contributing to unrest today. Part of that unrest stemmed from the incarceration of Blue Suns’ leaders Dal’Serah and Santiago, something Zaeed was happy to take full credit for having done. Unfortunately, the aftermath of Zaeed’s capture of the pair had left Caecidia Verinus—the former number three of the group—as the organization’s leader, a move that didn’t sit well with either the batarian or the human members.

Massani had put in numerous hours quietly observing the turian’s residence, without once seeing her leave … or arrive. Thanks to the comms he had been monitoring, he was sure she was inside the place; only trouble was, she was never alone … there was always at least six big-ass turians and four or five squints—all heavily armed and armored—inside the place with her. He felt confident that, given enough time, he could whittle her guards away, but her residence had a safe-room. Eliminating the muscle would do him no good if he couldn’t drag the bitch out of her reinforced safe haven. He needed to get her outside … away from her refuge.

Pulling up the plans for the building on his omnitool … dammit to hell! He could sure make use of Samantha Traynor’s proficiency with pulling up building plans! … he carefully studied the layout of the area around Verinus’ safe-room. There was a secondary exit from within; it ran straight down twenty meters within a meter-diameter shaft, to a tunnel with an exit in the basement of a close-by Blue Suns owned building, itself sitting at the entrance to an old platinum mine.

He made a face as he polished off the beer, then closed his omnitool, stood up and left through a side exit. He needed to go back to his room … it was someplace warm and quiet … a place he could think. Need a second geezer fer dis job. Happen da Shadow Broker can be ov assistance.

♦

T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

We stepped out of the shuttle and were met by Rachaël and Liara before we had walked more than a few paces across the landing pad. Liara addressed us first. “Looks as if your trip to Serrice went well.”

I smirked as I replied, “Thanks to our sponsorship by Spectre Shepard, Mallene Calis and Serrice Industries are none the wiser they just sold a pair of extremely high-end omnitools to the Shadow Broker. Of course, I’ll reimburse you from Broker assets, Liara, and…” I turned my gaze to Shepard as I continued, “I really appreciate you taking the lead on this for us, Shepard. Already, there are far too many people aware of our new position as info brokers, with several of that small group able to name us as Shadow Broker … I don’t wish to add anyone else to their ranks.”

I walked up to Liara and brought my forearm up in front of me; without touching my new bracelet, I thought: MESSAGE; Liara T’Soni, Thessia; Thank you for everything! SEND. Faster than it takes to tell, my new omnitool activated, composed the text message, sent it and shut down. Much to her surprise, the omnitool on Liara’s wrist came to life in acceptance of my message. She squeaked in disbelief at discovering she was able to read my words in her native language.

“Goddess, Sammy! How is it that you know Thessian?”

I showed my teeth in a huge grin. “Just one of the simpler programs this new omnitool can employ. In addition to being tied to my DNA, thanks to Shepard’s choice of synthesis to end the war, it’s physically linked to my nervous system. I don’t need to touch it, either to activate it or to generate a simple message; I just think of what I need to say, and the recipient automatically receives my texts in their native tongue.”

Liara shook her head slightly, saying, “That is remarkable, Sammy.”
“And I don’t have to physically swap functions – if I already have it set in combat mode and have to hack into a computer, or door lock, I simply think my way through that action while the tool remains ready for combat. It’s quite incredible.”

“It sounds as if it was worth every credit you had to pay.” Taking me by the arm, Liara walked beside me, guiding me back into the house. “I want you to accompany me to the Comms Center …” over her shoulder, she added, “… you as well, Mr Buchanan.” We entered the house and turned towards her secure Communications facility. “While I was monitoring the network, I discovered some data which I am sure will interest you.”

With a happy laugh, I said, “Lead on, please!”

Once inside the estate’s secure communications suite, Liara took a seat in front of a familiar looking console. “While I was monitoring the network, I performed an extensive search for a secure place from which you and Griff could live and work.” He and I each sat in chairs on either side of Liara as she continued to explain. “The Illusive Man was quite attached to the Horsehead Nebula, if the number of Cerberus facilities constructed in the systems there is any indication.”

She touched several controls on the haptic interface in front of the console as she added, “I thought about Minuteman Station as a base of operations for you, but it’s much too large … at least for the immediate future … but that does not mean you should be afraid to establish a presence there. What I did discover is a medium-sized orbital platform, located in the Strenuus System; it’s in a stable orbit about the star in the dark space at the L5 Lagrangian point of Antitarra, the second planet in the system.”

She pulled up a picture depicting a three-quarter view of what we learned was Ahn’Kahar Station while continuing to explain, “It’s not much larger than a heavy interstellar freight hauler, which would make it difficult for anyone to find—unless they were actively searching for it—and it’s been abandoned since before the war ended.” Splitting her attention between Griff and myself, she explained, “Many of the scientists rescued by Shepard’s team from Gellix during the war originally came from Ahn’Kahar; it’s believed that much of the research equipment employed by them is still there.”

Directing her attention to Griff, she added, “Fairly short FTL trip to the relay in Pax … it’s a one-relay hop to Widow from there, two relays to Sol. Close enough to the remains of all the other Cerberus stations in the nebula, particularly Minuteman, yet far enough away from everything to offer you the privacy you need to do your work unimpeded.”

Buchanan nodded in agreement as Liara turned towards me. “It’s armored and well-armed for its size, Sammy. You won’t prevail in fights against heavy cruisers or dreadnaughts, but it could certainly deal with a frigate or smaller warship.” With a small giggle, she added, “Its lack of mobility is a definite drawback. Best not to get in a shooting contest with anyone.”

“Sounds like a good prospect for a new base to which we could relocate, but we would need to isolate a deck inside,” Griff said in a soft, thoughtful tone. “Any agents working for us there would have to be restricted to a specific area … perhaps one deck, with a hanger bay.”

Picking up the thread, I added, “We could utilize the entire upper deck for ourselves, Griff. Isolate it from the rest of the station … along with the environmental controls – lights, HVAC, that sort of thing. It’s imperative that any personnel working for the Shadow Broker not be able to either confirm or deny our presence aboard.”

“Actually, having Iringù-Ebízkur anywhere nearby would be a give-away, I think.” Griff actually
“Irinqu-Ebizkur is a helluva lot more noticeable on the Citadel. She could coast along in the station’s shadow while we were inside, virtually invisible to detection.” Deciding to redirect our discussion, I asked, “Were you able to turn up any data concerning Owen Fletcher or Garrett Sutton?”

Liara pushed away from the counter as she replied with a frown, “I didn’t do any research on either of them, Sammy … I’m sorry. I felt it best to allow you to search for their transgressions, as you know exactly what to look for.”

I nodded slowly as she finished speaking. “Okay. I appreciate you substituting for Griff and myself while we were in Serrice. I guess we better make ready to return to the Citadel.”

“There is no rush, Sammy.” The protest came quickly. “You and Griff are welcome to stay another night. I’d like you to have dinner with us, after which we can speak some more … and Rachael told me she wants to sit down with the two of you, discuss your future and speak of old times, over glasses of some fine sipping whiskey.”

I grinned at the memory that instantly surfaced … of Shepard, still in the Normandy’s server, expressing a desire to do what Liara had just described; she had told me then that I reminded her of a young Navy lieutenant she once knew … one that hated batarians. It was during the beginning of my time trapped—along with Steve Cortez and Tali’Zorah—in the bottom of Harbinger’s huge hanger space, right after I had relieved Javik of his head inside Ziuk’Durmah.

“Okay, Liara … I can monitor the network just as well from here as from our apartment in Bravo Ward, and Griff …” I smirked as I looked past the asari to catch his eye again, “… really enjoyed sleeping in a bed that easily accommodated his bulk.”

Griff good-naturedly smirked right back. “I may never leave again, Sammy. I love this place!”

Liara laughed. “Just think about how much you’ll look forward to visiting in the future, Griff.”

After enjoying an excellent dinner as guests of Liara and Rachael, I found myself sitting in the comfortable confines of an exquisitely upholstered armchair, placed at an angle in front of a large fireplace; beside me, Shepard sat in the twin to my own chair, looking into a fire that had diminished as it consumed its fuel. Rachael slowly stood, placed another log in the middle of the flames, then grabbed the bottle of Bushmills 21. After refilling my glass, she added a bit to her own, set the bottle on the side table between us and retook her seat with a huge, satisfied sigh. “Life doesn’t get any better than this, Sammy.” Taking a sip of the potent single malt, she placed her upper teeth on her lower lip to suck a bit of air before tipping her head back in apparent pleasure.

I took a look at Griff, sprawled out in a third chair on Shepard’s right, snoring softly with his head tipped back atop the backrest. I chuckled, took a small sip from my own glass and replied, “It doesn’t … and there have been times in my life, Shepard … many times, that I really believed I would never live to enjoy what I have today.” After another sip, I added, “I keep waiting for the other boot to drop … there just has to be something really bad heading my way.”

Shepard turned her head to look at me and smiled. “I don’t believe that’s true, Sammy. I’ve been the victim of Dwin the trickster many times over the past 16, 17 years, but I truly believe we each make our own story. Whether it’s called fate, luck, or karma, it’s all the same.” She took another sip of whiskey, then said, “From your discussion with Liara, I gather you will soon provide me
with enough information to present an airtight case with Alliance Brass against Lieutenant Commander Sutton?”

Nodding my head slightly, I responded in a neutral tone … one that belied my deeply-held loathing of the miserable bastard. “I seriously doubt that man would have transferred me to the shipyard if he could have envisioned where my path would take me. The Illusive Man wanted me dead, Shepard, and he wanted Sutton to devise a way to achieve that goal.” I swirled the liquid in my glass, took another sip, then rose from the chair to stand beside the massive fireplace. I stared into the icy-green depths of her eyes for several moments before continuing. “I’m really glad you were able to convince that sonuvabitch to put a bullet in his own head, Shepard. You saved me the trouble of having to take care of him personally.”

Still facing Shepard, I took a shallow sip from my glass, rolled it around my tongue and mouth once, then allowed the smooth burn of liquid spice to slide down my throat; it was absolutely exquisite! I held the glass up in front of me as I looked at her; she raised the bottle to offer more, which I politely declined. Reflecting on what the Spectre had told me about the distillery, I asked again, “Only 1100 cases a year? A 200 case-a-year improvement in a hundred seventy-five years? Truly, that is some limited production hooch!” I finished off my portion before adding, “I don’t expect the Reapers were any help, were they.”

“No, most definitely not.” Offering a smirk, she added, “Have another glass, Sammy. I don’t get many opportunities to share this stuff, so … enjoy it while you can.”

I relented and retook my seat, allowing her to splash another two fingers into my glass. The whiskey was most likely responsible for the warm feeling in my middle, but I knew that sitting and sipping with Rachael was the reason for my overall sense of well-being.

The fire had burned down to hot glowing embers by the time we decided to retire for the evening. I roused Griff from his nap and, together, we climbed the stairs and went to our rooms. I closed my door and leaned my back against the heavy wood for a few moments, before peeling off my clothes and crawling into the massive bed. Only thing that would make this perfect would be Xiulan snuggled up beside me, came the thought.

I thought briefly about Buchanan … as far as I knew, the man was all alone in the galaxy … no family left alive after the war, not even a love interest. I wonder how many people are out there that share his circumstances. I didn’t think he was unhappy with his life, but still … Am I the anchor that’s keeping him moving? I know he loves me, but he’s not in love with me … is he? I needed to have another discussion with him, but I’d have to approach the subject carefully; the very nature of our work dictated we’d nearly always be in close physical proximity. Griff had never given me any reason to question our relationship, but we had never been forced to live together on a semi-permanent basis, either.

You’re looking for problems where they don’t exist, Sammy! I cleared my mind, silently recited my personal mantra and slowly slid into a dreamless sleep.

I woke from a pleasant dream – Xiulan and I were frolicking in the shallow ocean water lapping at the white sand beach of the small island we had visited just before our reassignments – before the war. Simpler times, it seemed. I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the mattress. Looking at the chrono, I decided I had time to do my exercises and take a quick shower before going downstairs for breakfast. I sent a message to Buchanan as I entered the bathroom; after relieving my bladder, I returned to the bedroom, there to run through my exercise routine.

Soaked with sweat after an intense hour, I entered the shower and gratefully allowed the warm
water to wash over me. I hadn’t been standing under the spray long before my stomach grumbled its message of hunger; I reluctantly left the water’s warm embrace, dried myself and dressed. Knowing we’d be leaving by mid-morning, I packed everything away and brought my travel bag with me downstairs, where I placed it in the hallway by the exit.

Of some surprise, I discovered Buchanan was already in the dining hall, sitting at a table with a tray piled high with food. Any thought that the man might starve while on Thessia instantly died as I looked at the assortment of asari cuisine on which he was dining.

I loaded a tray of my own, grabbed a cup of honest-to-God coffee—probably from Shepard’s personal stash—and took a seat across from my partner. I acknowledged his cheery good morning, then applied myself to making all the food on my tray disappear with as little fanfare as possible. When I had slowed down a bit, Griff nodded towards me and said, “Looks like you’re as hungry as I am this morning. Food’s good, huh?”

I nodded as I continued to chew; before I could swallow, Shepard and Liara entered the hall; after filling trays with breakfast for themselves, they came over to our table and sat down, Shepard beside Griff, with Liara sitting beside me across the table from them. After ‘good mornings’ all around, Liara directed her gaze towards me.

“With the exception of a small percentage of the financial reserves, I’ve handed over all the assets controlled by the Shadow Broker, Sammy. I’ll give you all of the records just before you and Griff return to Iringù-Eßizkur for your flight back to the Citadel.”

I raised an eyebrow as I asked, “Small percentage? Just how small are we talking about, Liara?”

“Less than fifteen percent … a bit more than the amount of my net worth as an info broker on Illium, right before Shepard and I eliminated the yahg and took over his operation.” She looked down for a moment, then added, “I kept a careful accounting of all the assets held by the Shadow Broker and my own business from that time. The Broker’s wealth declined somewhat as I chased down a way to stop the Reapers, Sammy. Once the war began, those were increasingly desperate times; having all the credits in the galaxy would have done us no good if we were dead.”

My jaw dropped at this revelation. “I knew the bastard was wealthy, Liara, but you weren’t exactly a pauper on Illium. Was that the reason for his … I don’t know … arrogant ruthlessness?”

She shook her head slightly, replying, “I honestly don’t know, Sammy. As a yahg, he already felt that all the other races were beneath him. My guess is that his enormous wealth just fed that opinion.”

I thought about everything I’d just learned as I finished eating. Downing the rest of my coffee, I stood, asked if everyone else was good, then went to the beverage station to refill my mug.

I returned to my seat and, with a happy sigh, took several sips of the flavorful beverage. Glancing at Griff, I knew we better be off-planet shortly, just to keep from getting any softer.

Buchanan and I had finished saying our farewells to the house staff; before we could walk outside, a lone commando approached; hand extended in friendship, Aethyta first walked up to Buchanan. After a few moments of quiet conversation, she turned to me. “Understand each of you got some really high-end omnitools … Serrice? Best of the best, Sammy.”

She took my hands in hers and squeezed slightly, saying, “It’s been damned good to have you and Buchanan here for a visit, Sammy. I understand you’re taking over Liara’s … position … as a top-
tier data broker. If even half of what she and Shepard have told me about you is actually true, I
know you’ll do great.” With a twinkle in her eyes, she concluded by wishing me well. “Travel
with the blessings of the Goddess, Samantha Traynor. Return to us for another visit … soon.”

Already sad at having to leave the T’Soni estate, I picked up my pack and started for the door
leading to the landing pad. Before I could exit, Liara came up beside me and hooked her arm into
mine. “I wouldn’t want you to leave these behind, Sammy.” So saying, she held up a small case.
“The OSDs in this package contain all the information I promised to give you … locations of
facilities, account numbers and institution names, contact info for specialized agents, assassins
and wet-work teams … everything to which I had access right before and during the war. Plug them
into your systems once you’re back aboard Iringù-Êbîzkur. The information they contain will be
invaluable as you move forward.”

I stuffed the small carry case into my shoulder bag as we strolled towards Iringù-Êbîzkur. “Thank
you, Liara. You and Spectre Shepard have been more than kind these past few days.”

A shy smile tipped the corners of her mouth upwards. “I hope you will consider our estate as a
home away from home, Samantha. Travel here whenever you need to decompress. You and Mr
Buchanan will always be welcome here.” She stopped walking and turned towards me; to say I
was surprised by what she did next would be an understatement. She placed her hands on the sides
of my waist and pulled me towards her, then reached her arms around my back to embrace me
bodily. I unceremoniously dropped my pack and brought my arms around her; placing my hands in
the middle of her lower back caused her to tip her head back slightly.

Before I could think about it, she pressed her lips to mine in a kiss that was much more than
sisterly while being just less than invitation. I remembered thinking about this on the Normandy’s
return trip from the galaxy’s edge … I had always wondered what Liara’s lips would taste like …
would feel like against my own. She broke contact in a seemingly reluctant manner, and I noticed
the edges of her irises had darkened. After glancing up at the foreboding dull-black presence
standing over us, she slowly withdrew her arms from behind me, said, “Go with the Goddess,
Shadow Broker,” then turned and moved away from Irin’s liftoff zone.

Spectre Shepard, having walked a few paces behind Liara and myself while quietly speaking with
Buchanan, smirked as she stopped in front of me and took my right hand. “It’s been a pleasure
having you and Griff visit with us, Sammy. Please … don’t hesitate to call Liara or me … ever.
The commandos in charge of our comms are all aware of your identity … but not your profession,
so when you do call,” she chuckled, “do so without the theatrics. None of that is necessary for us
here.”

“Thank you for everything, Shepard. The hospitality you and your siame have extended to us
makes me feel as if we truly are sisters.” With that, I released her hand and embraced her as hard
as Liara had just hugged me. With a whispered, “Goddess watch over you, Spectre,” I kissed her
on the cheek. Drawing back, I witnessed her look of surprise quickly change to one of acceptance
of the unexpected familiarity. I lingered slightly before reluctantly pulling my hands away from
her waist. Damn! She feels every bit as good to me as Xiùlán!

I turned towards my partner; with a wave of my arm indicating Iringù-Êbîzkur, I asked, “Shall
we?” Following a nod of his head, I redirected my attention towards the shadow looming over us.
“Iringù-Êbîzkur? Time to return to the Citadel.”

A/N: Much thanks to Desert Sunrise for the timely assist with Liara’s farewell to Sammy.
Ahn’Kahar Station

*A/N: Sammy’s and Buchanan’s conversation when ‘suited’ up is depicted in italics. Iringù-Eßizkur’s audible speech is always enclosed by single angle brackets [<>] and printed in underlined italics.*

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Knowledge after all is a dark art, full to the brim with liberty, a trembling, malleable power. – Nikita Gill, *Fierce Fairytales: Poems and Stories to Stir Your Soul*

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*Ai – [愛 – love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)]

*GST – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space*

*Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)*

*Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’*

*RCS – Reaction Control System … a spacecraft system that uses thrusters to provide station-keeping in orbit*

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♦ AT LARGE, OUTER COUNCIL SPACE ♦

I had asked Iringù-Eßizkur to make the return trip to the Citadel without using the relays, as she had done on the passage to Thessia two days prior. I believe my request actually surprised her, but I wanted her to take her time, as we needed to have a discussion while we were traveling.

Once she was steady on her trajectory and moving at close to her top speed of 3.2 trillion kilometers a second, I settled into one of the lounge chairs in the observation compartment to have a serious conversation with our guardian Repository. Before I could begin speaking with Irin, Griff sat down beside me and asked, “Sammy, just what in hell did I witness on Thessia? You saying farewell to Rachaél … and Liara in particular! … seemed to be awfully … intimate.” He eyed me with just a touch of … not jealousy … more like … concern.

“Liara surprised me, Griff. Though, I can’t honestly say I didn’t enjoy her farewell; she’s quite good at kissing. I must admit that I have been a bit curious ever since Liara and I shared a bed during our voyage back from the outer rim in the *Normandy* … during which time nothing more than cuddling ever took place between us – and all of which both Shepard and Xiùlán are very much aware of.” I met his eyes and asked directly, “Do you think I should have backed off?”

“Your relationships are your own business, Sammy. It just seemed a bit … I don’t know … over the top?”

“Little bits of casual intimacy are common … maybe even expected … among the asari, Griff. I have never considered Liara to be an ordinary asari but, it would seem that she really is … perhaps more so now than when I first met her, since she has returned to her home world.”

“Still … You’re not asari, Sammy … and neither is Xiùlán.” Griff remained unconvinced and I couldn’t help but chuckle, finally understanding the basis of his concern.

“If you think I’m going to keep Liara kissing me a secret from Xiùlán, you’re mistaken.” Shaking my head, I still had a smile on my face as I added, “We have complete trust in each other; I would
never violate that trust … nor risk my relationship with her … over a simple kiss from an asari, even if it was Liara T'Soni! She is obviously head-over-heels in love with Spectre Rachaël Shepard, just as I am with Xiülán.”

Thinking about my Inamorata nearly brought tears to my eyes. “Xiülán is everything to me, Griff … you, of all people should be aware of that!” Voice hitching at the memory, I clutched the center of my chest while adding, “I broke her heart … once, while I was assigned to the shipyard and she was stationed on the Tokyo … I would rather rip my own heart out than ever have to witness that level of hurt and pain in her eyes again.”

I watched the corners of Griff’s mouth tip up slightly as he replied, “Okay, Sammy … I understand, I think … and I always knew that underneath your apparent shyness beats a heart of an incredibly passionate woman; that passion is not something you display on a regular basis—unless Xiülán is with you—so it was a bit surprising to see it displayed at Liara’s home.”

He started to rise from his chair, only for me to wave him back down. “Stick around, Griff. What I need to discuss with Iringù-Eßizkur concerns you as well.” As he sat back and relaxed, I spoke to our rather large friend. “Okay Irin, let’s talk.”

“What do we have to discuss, Friend-Samantha? I have committed myself to being your safe haven, and your transport, for as long as you have need of me.”

The way this … mechanical intelligence … reminded me of her promise brought a tightness to my chest, such that I truly wished I could physically embrace her. It had taken a long time for me to feel I could really trust her … or Žiuk’Durmah, or Harbinger; after so much time, I definitely felt that Irin was my friend. It took me a while to respond to her question … long enough that she felt the need to prompt me by saying my name. “Samantha?”

“I’m sorry, Irin. I was thinking about … well, us. The feelings I have for you are not easy to put into words. I do want to make sure you realize how important you are to me … and Buchanan. You’ve willingly given up a portion of your own freedom in order to provide us with a service, the value of which is beyond my ability to calculate.”

In a tone suggesting a bit of snarkiness, she replied, “My own freedom, as you define it, would be meaningless to me without a purpose, Friend-Samantha … The Shepard chose to merge organic and synthetic lives. In that moment, the original purpose for my existence was eliminated. Understand: I must have a reason to exist. Providing a safe environment for you … for Buchanan-Griffen … to travel, to live, to work, to rest, is all the purpose I need … or desire.”

“Are you aware I intend for us to permanently leave the Citadel?”

With an embarrassed tone, she replied, “I was able to overhear some of your conversations with T’Soni-Liara. I am in agreement with her assessment of our situation. It would be imprudent for us to continue operations on the Citadel. My continued presence—whether docked on the ward or orbiting close-by—is not something that can continue to escape official notice, nor can speeder trips back and forth between myself and your rooftop parking go unremarked upon indefinitely.”

“Then you must know I am considering moving our operation to Ahn’Kahar Station … it’s a small, obscure platform in the Horsehead Nebula, orbiting the star Strenuus, at the trailing L5 Lagrangian point of Antitarra. At some point in the future, I believe we can add research assistants inside Minuteman Station, in orbit about the gas giant Thesalgon in the same system. That station was still largely intact when the Illusive Man abandoned it near the end of the war.”
Do you need to travel to Strenuus in order to personally inspect Ahn’Kahar Station?

“I’d like to stop at the Citadel first … I want to pick up some fresh clothes and check on our apartment, make sure it’s secure.” Thinking about where we were going, I added, “And, we will need to bring environmental suits, just in case the air inside the station is toxic … or non-existent.”

Very well, Shadow Broker.

♦ AT LARGE, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Griff and I watched the viewscreen intently as Iringù-Eßizkur slowed her approach to the small station. “Looks like it’s running on minimal power, Sammy,” observed my partner.

“Just enough output to keep a navicomputer and RCS operatioanal.” Thinking about the station’s history, I said, “Irin, have you scanned for organic life signs?”

I have, Shadow Broker. There are no life signs within the station. Breathable atmosphere within is non-existent. Internal temperatures average 4 degrees. An inspection will be necessary to determine if temperature and atmo can be restored to human-acceptable levels.

Griff looked at me unhappily as he said, “Guess it’s a good thing we brought those damned suits along, huh?”

I grinned cheekily at him as I requested that Iringù-Eßizkur locate a working airlock.

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Griff carefully moved through the inner hatchway and paused; after casting the bright beam of light from his newly acquired omnitool around the area, he moved ahead several steps, giving me enough room to step up beside him. “Place is really cold, Sammy, and the air is …” he paused to glance at the information projected on the inside of his visor. “… really thin, and oxygen poor. We need to find the main environmental controls.”

After studying the station map on my omnitool, I pointed. “Ahead and then left. Administrator’s office should have an access terminal. Let’s just hope it’s still operational.”

Griff fell into step beside me as I began walking. “Thankfully, the gravity generators are still functioning, or we’d have to use our mag-locks to stay planted on the deck.”

I chuckled mirthlessly. “I seriously doubt the scientists sabotaged the place when they left … most likely scenario is the last person leaving simply dialed the power back.” I turned left into a short passage; upon reaching a vertically split hatch guarded by a red Haptic lock, I tried waving my omnitool-bearing wrist through the interface.

A mechanical voice, sounding like a female with a blend of male undertones, echoed faintly about me as it sounded in my helmet headset. “Unauthorized entry attempt detected. Access denied.”

Looking at Griff, I said, “Guess we do this the hard way.” Fortunately, I had done a lot of reading during some of the time Iringù-Eßizkur had taken to reach the Citadel from Thessia, so had learned a great deal about security measures taken by the various cells working for Cerberus.

Crouching beside the door, I activated my new omnitool with a thought and began probing the intricacies of the unfriendly lock; in less than 8 seconds, the barrier cross-faded from red-to-
orange-to-green, allowing the door panels to unlatch and retract into the bulkheads.

I looked up at Griff, standing beside the bulkhead across the opening from me. With a slight shrug of his shoulders—at least, that’s what it looked like he had done in his heavy suit—he inclined his head towards the compartment as he commented, “Didn’t look that hard to me.”

With a slight sigh, I eased myself around the bulkhead and slowly stood; in response to my movement, a number of low-intensity lights came on to illuminate the area within as I took a step past the opening. The temperature and air in here were no improvement from the passageway behind us, but I could see several glowing screens on a counter at the far wall.

I walked up to the glowing monitors; after perusing the information scrolling slowly up on each screen, I selected the environmental interface. Of some surprise—particularly considering who the previous owner had been—it wasn’t even password protected; I was able to access the controls for each of the six levels within the structure of the station. I looked at Griff as I asked, “Should I ramp up the heat and atmo on just this level, or maybe all of them at once?”

After thinking about it for a moment, he replied, “Better restore atmo to the entire station first, Sammy; if things go sideways in here, we can survive the chill, but only if what we have to breathe isn’t toxic.”

Doing as he suggested, I set the HACR plant to maximum heating and reinitiated the oxygen generators; this caused an immediate increase in the volume of air entering the compartment. The percentage readouts in my HUD slowly began changing, indicating breathable air was displacing the oxygen deficient, CO2 rich air being pulled out through the return ducts in this compartment.

“I’m turning the heaters on as well, Griff … so, looks like we’ll be in a shirtsleeve environment in eight-to-ten hours. It’ll take at least that long for the heaters to bring ambient up to 20 or 21 degrees. Do you want to explore a bit, or wait until we’re able to do so without our suits?”

Griff had been using a secondary terminal to check the status of the onboard supplies. “Looks as if there are very few food supplies on board. We’re going to need to make a cargo run to stock up.” Buchanan tasked his omnitool with downloading a copy of the station’s current inventory. “Let’s head back to Iringû-Ebîzkur, Sammy. I’m hungry, and I can study these downloaded records and have a meal while we wait for the environment to stabilize.”

Moving to the terminal Griff was using, I said, “While you’re at it, download the station’s logs, Griff. I want to see how long it’s been sitting out here abandoned … maybe learn what Cerberus was doing here.”

“Consider it done, Sammy.”

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♦ INSIDE IRINGÛ-ÉBÎZKUR, DOCKED AT AHN’KAHAR STATION ♦

Griff had uploaded the station’s inventory records to our isolated server—a precaution against rogue programming, imbedded viruses, or malware—and was done with his review almost before he’d begun eating dinner. “They either kept their inventory purposely low or had an increasingly bad feeling about their status here with the Illusive Man pulling their strings.” He snorted in disgust while taking several bites of his meal; after chewing and swallowing, he asked, “Perhaps a combination of the two? You told me their departure was sudden … done with no warning, and it took Harper’s forces eight or nine weeks to track them down to Gellix.”

I nodded my head as I thought back to that time during my posting on the Normandy SR2. “I
managed to convince Commander Shepard to investigate what was only a rumor, after her squad stopped the Cerberus attempt to kidnap and kill the councilors on the Citadel.” I took a couple swallows of beer and set the bottle back down in its condensation ring; idly spinning it around, I asked, “So, how much stuff do we need to order?”

Griff bit into a buttered roll and chewed as he thought about the question; unfortunately, his reply didn’t clear up our problem. “Depends on what we’ll be doing here, Sammy … now, and in the future. If it’s just the two of us, we can make a grocery run every month or so, but …” he paused, finished his own beer, then belched quietly into his fist before continuing, “If your goal … our goal … is to have a research team working here so you and I can sleep occasionally?” He grinned when I snorted at his comment concerning sleep. “A research team will need support staff, which will also require food. The more researchers on the station, the more staff will be needed to support them. Inventory will have to be increased exponentially.”

Shaking my head, I replied, “Let’s just concentrate on the two of us for now, Griff. Once we’ve established ourselves here on this station, we can revisit expanding our operations.” I picked up my dishes and took them into the small galley area, where I washed everything. Griff handed me his dishes, which I also washed as he dried and put everything away.

Once we were done with that, I returned to my own research terminal to study the station’s recent history. Thanks to Harper’s paranoia, the entire station had been rigged with cameras to monitor the scientists each and every move. Naturally, this was the first system I had disabled once we’d gained access to the place … after ensuring the collected data streams had not been continuously transmitted to some off-site location.

Reviewing the recordings of the last days the station had been inhabited by Harper’s scientists revealed they had been planning to abandon the place for a number of weeks prior to leaving; I could only attribute their success at escaping unnoticed to the Illusive Man’s preoccupation with controlling the Reapers for his own purposes.

As for the time since the station’s abandonment, there had been just two visits by any vessels up until Iringü-Ebizkúr’s appearance; both had been Cerberus cruisers, and each had sent a number of shuttles to the hangar bay on deck six. The internal cameras recorded Cerberus soldiers prowling about during the first ship’s visit; once satisfied there was no longer anyone still aboard, the second ship arrived in less than a week, deploying a number of workers in an obvious cleanup operation. All of the equipment that could easily be moved had been shuttled back to the cruiser in a days-long operation.

After seeing what had been removed, it was easy to guess why the racks of servers in the central processing hub on Deck Five had been left behind … Harper hadn’t completely abandoned the station, perhaps planning to repurpose it once he was in control of the galaxy. It was fortunate for everyone that Shepard, near death herself, had convinced him to put a bullet in his own head.

I looked at Buchanan, sitting beside me while studying the stations inventory records. “Hey Griff, it appears we’re the first visitors the station has had since Harper abandoned it. Have you discovered anything interesting?”

“Yes, actually. It would appear there were fifteen to twenty research scientists on the station at any one time, with a support staff of from eight to ten people.” He scrolled through several screens before turning his grey-green eyes back towards me. “Supplies were brought in on an irregular schedule, and always from different systems. These reports indicate the runs were becoming increasingly hazardous as the Reaper presence increased and spread across the galaxy.”

I nodded my head as he was speaking, already thinking about what we would need to do to survive
out here. “The assets we now control? We can set up for the same thing, Griff. There are Broker-owned warehouses on several planets, scattered throughout this sector.”

“We’d have to exercise a lot more caution than Cerberus had to use, Sammy. It wouldn’t be good to have anyone knowing this place exists, much less who its inhabitants are.”

I stood and stretched, then rolled my head about in an effort to relieve the kinks along the sides of my neck. “I’m going to crawl off for some rack time, Griff. We’ll look it all over tomorrow, see what else was left behind when Cerberus abandoned it.” I yawned as I bade him goodnight.

◊ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ◊

“Moment of truth,” I murmured as I opened the inner hatch. After a few moments, I realized I was holding my breath and released it with a whoosh. Griff and I each had rebreathers, and I damn near reached for my mask as I stepped into the reception area and looked around … really looked around. I tentatively sampled the air through my nose; there was no odor … not that I’d been expecting any. The smell, if any actually existed, was virtually the same as any space vessel or station I’d ever served on or visited; it had the tang of recycling crossed with that from what I expected was a massive regenerative carbon dioxide mitigation system.

The 21-to-22 degrees temperature was still a touch on the cool side for my liking but was much better than the near zero conditions encountered the previous day. I glanced at my partner as I said, “Come on … let’s see what we can find. We need to check stores, and I want to see the hangar deck.”

Griff chuckled as we began walking towards the admin offices and elevators. Since our visit yesterday, I had recoded all the haptic locks so they would respond to our omnitools only. Entering the elevator at the end of the passage, I touched the glowing symbol for level six and leaned against the side wall as the doors closed with a sighing hiss of hydraulics long unused.

After a brief descent, the doors opened onto an area more than large enough for several UT-47 style shuttlecraft to park side-by-side; I was surprised to discover there were two such craft—each bearing the Cerberus logo on their sides—sitting together near the main hatches. Of greater surprise, there was a pair of Cerberus flagged fighter-craft—virtually identical to Alliance SX-3 interceptors—sitting along the far wall. Griff gave a long, low whistle of appreciation. “Think we should take those out for a joyride, Sammy?”

I gave him my best cheesy grin and replied, “Yeah … I’m not doing that. Probably best for both of us if you don’t, either.”

“Killjoy!” came the half-hearted, snarky reply.

As I walked slowly out to inspect the shuttles, I sensed Buchanan readying a weapon. Operating under the assumption it was better to be prepared and have nothing happen than the opposite, we were both armed and armored. The hatches on both craft were wide open, as if they were simply waiting for passengers that had never arrived. We looked inside each one and found exactly the same thing; both were empty. Griff was ecstatic. “Looks like we just acquired a pair of Kodiaks, Sammy?”

I gave him my best cheesy grin and replied, “Yeah … I’m not doing that. Probably best for both of us if you don’t, either.”

“Killjoy!” came the half-hearted, snarky reply.

“We’ll definitely be able to put these to good use, Griff. Just need to reset the ship I.D.s and transponders so they ping as private spacecraft.” Looking around at the space available, I gave
voice to my thoughts. “Wonder if it’s possible for Iringù-Eßizkur to fit herself inside here.”

Griff immediately began sizing up the available space and the apparent size of the entry. “I don’t know, Sammy. She stands pretty tall when parked and getting her out of here could not be done rapidly. We’ll need to get outside, take a look from one of these shuttles, but I expect she’s virtually indistinguishable from the rest of the metal on the outside when she’s hunkered down by the airlock.”

Nodding as I looked around, I replied, “I expect you’re correct, Griff. I would really like to get her under cover, if for no other reason than she’s a virtual dead-giveaway of our presence.” With a last look around, I turned back for the elevator. “Come on. Let’s keep moving.” Bringing up a map with my omnitool, I added, “This hangar is two decks high, so decks five and six don’t run the full length of the station.”

Griff, having spent a portion of the previous evening studying station schematics, pointed past the two fighter craft. “Area back there is shops—fabrication areas, repairs—for spacecraft that dock here. Past that is the machinery area – everything that keeps the station habitable, such as the heating and air conditioning plant, atmosphere processing, artificial gravity, automated orbital station-keeping controls … and, like this hangar, it goes up into the area of deck five.”

Pointing up, he continued, “The middle of deck five is your area, Sammy; all the computers and servers, along with all the optical cabling that connects to everything else. The entire section is heavily shielded and cooled, as it’s not meant for anyone to actually work in there.”

We walked back to the elevator as he explained, “Deck Four contains numerous offices, several kitchens, food storage and dining areas, along with some recreational areas. The living areas for research personnel and support staff, along with a number of restrooms and bathrooms, occupy Deck Three.”

Griff continued speaking as we entered the elevator. “All the non-classified research labs are on Deck Two, along with a number of conference rooms. Deck One, of course, is the admin level; there are also a number of labs set aside where some of Cerberus’ truly sensitive research was carried out.”

As we left the elevator on Deck One, he added, “There are also several residential suites on this level, and … there is a private kitchen. It would seem that, if we are to relocate ourselves here, that this deck is where we would best make a home for ourselves.”

Thinking about all the things Buchanan had just told me, I replied, “I expect you’re correct, Griff. The Shadow Broker needs an isolated area in which to work, and anyone else on this station, be they staff or researchers, must remain unaware of the Broker’s presence, or absence.” I continued to think about what we needed to do here. “Utilizing Iringù-Eßizkur, we could come and go as we please through the airlock … or, could we program one of the elevators to only travel between this level and the hangar, perhaps?”

“That’s a possibility,” came the thoughtful reply. “We need to look everything over … inspect the entire station, then decide what modifications we need to make, all while we continue our work as the Shadow Broker from within Iringù-Eßizkur.”

I dry-scrubbed my face with both hands. “Lady Liara has given us the locations of the facilities that we can employ to set all this up … we don’t have to do this all by ourselves, Griff.”

A slight smile gradually spread into a huge grin. “Good! That’s good! … I was really afraid the two of us would have to do all of this ourselves.”
I smiled back at him. “Don’t worry, Griff. We’ll get it sorted.”

*AT LARGE, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA*

Buchanan and I had returned to the familiar confines of our guardian Repository to continue our work as the Shadow Broker. After placing a couple of calls to contacts given to me by Liara T’Soni, I had engaged several people and a Broker owned company in the task of repurposing *Ahn’Kahar Station* to serve our needs, rather than those of Jack Harper and Cerberus.

We had inspected Deck Two, originally used for non-classified, non-sensitive research into ways to create and control human husks. It was some pretty horrific shit, such that I counted the galaxy fortunate Jack Harper had found the guts to vent his own head, thus saving Shepard from having to do the deed. The level would still be used for research, as soon as the specialized equipment could be procured—from multiple sources—and installed.

I needed a person to oversee the people we would be employing to perform the mundane, day-to-day tasks of data mining. To that end, I had set up a remote interview with a salarian … a former STG Colonel that had done work for T’Soni during the war, Zus’kann Solban. Unfortunately, Liara hadn’t been as diligent about following up on challenges to the Broker’s authority as her yahg predecessor, nor as diligent as I intended to be; the interview began on a rather unpleasant note, with Solban pointing out that the Broker had been quiet for quite some time; he was openly skeptical that I was who I said I was.

In my best ‘chew on your ass for questioning me’ tone of voice, I asked, “You dare to question my legitimacy? … my very existence!? Who do you think bailed your miserable cloaca out of the shit you—not to mention your entire fucking company—found yourself in on Horizon? All of you would have been Cerberus created husks trying to lick your damned eyes if I hadn’t directed the Alliance to lend a hand.” Dropping my voice to a growl that actually hurt my throat, I ground out, “Do you think your rescue, and Shepard turning that Sanctuary facility into a smoking crater, was some kind of pure dumb luck?”

The salarian’s expression had gone slack … his mouth was actually hanging open, and his eyes appeared glazed as I continued, “I’m offering you a position as a research supervisor for the most elite information brokerage in the galaxy, and you actually have the nerve to question me? For this insult alone I should send an enforcer to physically teach you a lesson in good manners, but good agents are hard to find these days … I cannot afford to indulge that desire; I certainly cannot eliminate any that survived the war. It is unfortunate that I feel your life is too damned valuable to waste on an enforcement exercise.”

I muted the mic so I could clear my throat, then waited. After nearly a half-minute of silence, Zus’kann Solban spoke in a halting, timid voice. “Please … forgive my insolence, Shadow Broker. I am sorry if I offended you. If you will give me your coordinates? …”

I let him stew for several seconds before responding with, “In good time, Solban, all in good time. First, I need you to track down several former researchers. It’s something I could easily do myself, but you’re on the ground, so to speak. I am transmitting their names and last known locations. I am also transferring a modest amount of credits to your personal account.”

At his look of surprise, I added, “I trust you will do as I have requested … the creds are for transportation … and to convince you I mean business. If you fail me in this, all the creds in the galaxy won’t be enough to hide you or keep you alive.” The instant after saying, “Contact me when you’ve completed your task … transportation will be arranged for you,” I punched the disconnect, then sat back and relaxed as I thought about our conversation. I couldn’t be sure, but
my gut told me Zus’kann Solban was still not completely convinced of my legitimacy.

As I took a drink of water, I glanced at Buchanan, standing to the side out of camera range. “You certainly have a way with words, Sammy. You have me convinced you’re the real deal, and I’m already your partner. Remind me to never get on your bad side, okay?”

I started to get up, but Griff waved me back down. “Zaeed Massani contacted us. Sounds like he needs some assistance.” With a grim smile, he added, “I told him we’d call him back; he’s standing by his comms system until we do.”

“Well, shit!” I had nearly forgotten that Massani was on Sanctum, attempting to capture the Blue Suns number 3—a female turian … and a thoroughly horrible person—named Caecidia Verinus. Looking at the return code, I told Griff, “I’ll call him now. May as well find out what he knows.”

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**VULPES, SANCTUM · DECORIS SYSTEM, SIGURD’S CRADLE**

Zaeed Massani was drinking his second beer of the evening, and the smell and flavor were just as offensive as the first one he’d consumed at *The Frozen Husband Tavern*. He set the glass down on the side table as his comms unit signaled an incoming message. *About goddammed time! She ain’t da only person what ’as a schedule ter keep.*

Keying the unit on, he grinned wolfishly at the image in front of him. *Damn if she don’t look as fuckin’ badass as the original,* came the thought, as he answered in his gravel-on-slate voice, “Shadow Broker.”

“Zaeed Massani. I trust you would not bother me unless you had something important to share?”

“It’s da reason I contacted ya,” he said, attempting to keep the annoyance from creeping into his voice. “I tracked down yer turian Blue Suns bi’ch like ya asked. Need some ’elp getting’ ’er outter ’er ’ouse.”

“What’s the setup?”

“Nearly der same as when we chased Solem Dal’Serah outta ’is place on da Citadel. She ’as a goddamned panic room wif an exit tunnel. I can’t go gunnin’ fer ’er in dat house wifout ’er getting’ away clean through dat ’scape tunnel.”

I thought about the problem for a few moments … enough time for the old merc to start getting fidgety as he waited, and he wasn’t going to like my solution. “Stay there … continue to monitor her … make sure she doesn’t slip past you and get off-world. I’ll call Cody on the Normandy. If he’s able to help, I’ll have him contact you with an arrival ETA … should be less than 12 hours.”

“Hey! Iffen yer talk to Cap’n Cody, ask ’im ter bring some good beer, eh? Swill on this fuckin’ planet ain’t tha’ far removed from batarian wizz!”

“I’ll pass your message along. Good night, Massani.”

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**AT LARGE, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA**

As I was still ‘in costume’, I went ahead and placed the call to the *Normandy*; I wanted to get the problem with the Blue Suns dealt with sooner rather than later, and I didn’t give a damn what time it was on the ship. If they were running on GST—as I continued to do on Irin, and as was common practice on Naval vessels—it was just past midnight. Bill would probably give me a bunch of shit
… something I was in no mood to tolerate from anyone, least of all him.

As the transmission connected, I found myself looking at the Normandy’s XO, Lieutenant Commander Greg Adams. “This is the Normandy. To whom am I speaking?”

“This is the Shadow Broker. I have information for Captain Bill Cody.”

“Captain Cody has retired for the night, Sir. Can I give him a message?”

Obviously, Adams didn’t realize he was speaking to his former comms specialist. That’s a good thing, came the thought, as I replied, “If he is still hell-bent on taking down the Blue Suns, I have a name and a location for him. Caecidia Verinus. Turian. Female. Former Cabal member. Former Blue Suns number 3 … now their number 1. Holed up in Vulpes, on Sanctum, Decoris System, Sigurd’s Cradle. Zaeed Massani is on site … has her under surveillance but cannot get to her without risking she will escape and get off world.”

Adams eyes had gone wide as I passed the information to him. “That is good news, Shadow Broker. I will pass this along to the captain … should know shortly if we can deviate from our routine patrols.”

“Whatever you decide, send a message to Massani. His contact info is being relayed on the subcarrier. And Commander Adams? …” I paused for a moment before passing on a warning. “Be sure you have a means of suppressing biotics, on the ground and on the ship. Disabling a former Cabal member, or having one in custody, is asking for trouble if her biotics cannot be controlled.”

I paused again, observing how Adams’ face had paled significantly when I had addressed him by name. Apparently, the Shadow Broker knowing exactly who he was—without any formal introduction—unnerved the man a bit. Trying to think of some way to ease his concerns about being on the list of Shadow Broker ‘knowns’… even though that list was quite extensive … I remembered Massani’s request and used a lighter, less belligerent tone to relay that information. “Zaeed also expressed a desire for some proper beer … he complains that the swill on that planet is only a step or two away from batarian piss.” I chuckled, the voice modulator changing it to a sound from the black pit of hell. “The man truly does enjoy his hops, Commander; if he’s griping about how bad the local brew tastes, you can probably imagine just how truly awful it is.”

Greg chuckled. “I’ll pass that information along as well, Shadow Broker.” He nodded as he eagerly cut the connection, my small attempt at humor obviously not assuaging all his fears.

I stood, stretched, then shut off the special lights and camera before leaving to grab a snack and crawl off to my bed.

After my normal morning routine of exercises and a warm shower, followed by coffee and breakfast with Buchanan, I contacted Cordell Webb, the lead engineer overseeing the many modifications to the station. In the nearly four weeks since he had begun work, he and his crew had erected an isolation bulkhead in the hangar bay; this would allow Griff or myself to leave the station and return—flying one of the two ex-Cerberus Kodiaks left behind—by utilizing an isolated hangar access door to the void outside.

Both shuttles had been stripped of their logos and identifiers and repainted a deep shade of red with light orange trim; their transponders now ‘squawked’ as privately-owned spacecraft, without identifying the owner. Once everything was up and running, we’d be able to come and go as we pleased, without having to worry about being seen by anyone on the station.
There were two freight elevators in the hangars that opened onto each of the five decks above; one of these was on our side of the newly erected bulkhead. We had the split access doors on each of the intervening levels and the ‘call pads’ outside those doors removed; each of the passageway access openings were then walled up to appear as if there had never been openings. Modifying the elevator programming to only go to the Shadow Broker’s level at the top of the station took mere moments; I also reset the weight sensors to recognize when there was ‘freight’ weight inside, allowing for faster travel when there were no more than three or four people using the car.

Both of the passenger elevators in the administration area had been programmed so they would ascend no further than Deck Two. The Haptic controls had been reprogrammed to eliminate Deck One as an option; the Decks throughout the entire station had been newly renumbered from one to five. As far as anyone would ever know, there was no habitable space above the newly renumbered Deck One. Two of the three stairwells connecting each deck had been modified as well … the stairs between Decks One and Two had been blocked off to eliminate access; the stairs now ended at newly constructed bulkheads on the renumbered Deck One.

In the third stairwell, situated next to our converted freight elevator, we adopted the same mods as we had done to the other elevators. Access doors on the landings between Decks Two through Five had been eliminated and the staircase ran between our hanger and our isolated deck at the top of the station.

The two-story engineering section on Deck Six would become the purview of purpose-programmed maintenance bots; human access, when required, would be limited to specially vetted maintenance and environmental equipment specialists. The Deck Five computer and server farm, already well secured, were hardened further by Webb’s crew.

As for our own work on Deck One, the modifications were a bit more extensive; we didn’t want to worry about a highly skilled tech detecting the resource drain… or, worse yet, some rogue agent sabotaging the station’s systems in an attempt to suffocate or freeze us out. To prevent both of those things, we had insisted on the entire deck having an isolated source of power and atmo—similar to our apartment on the Citadel—but in place of the normal sources for the level.

To that end, Webb and his team converted the administrator’s oversize office and reception area to serve as an auxiliary power and atmosphere source for our level alone, with a protected hallway running from the airlock to our living and research quarters. Since no one on the lower decks would even know we lived on the same station, I made a mental note to procure three additional, high-end technical maintenance drones that could function autonomously, and then add certain security features to their programming once we had them aboard.

Furthermore, one of the two large conference rooms had been stripped of all the furniture and reconfigured as an exercise room, with mats on the floor, two heavy bags suspended from the overhead, and a pair of resistance machines configured for each of us. Not surprisingly, Griff had checked the base resistance on my machine, and was embarrassed to admit it was close to that of his own. I had also upgraded the software controlling the artificial gravity in the room; once Griff had attempted to complete his own exercise regime at 1.75 times Earth normal, he confessed to feeling that I was the better ‘man’, then immediately apologized for the perceived insult.

As Griff and I were of like mind concerning our personal safety and security on this station, Griff met personally with Cordell Webb; Buchanan reported back to me that Mr Webb was quite respectful after meeting with him one time. Buchanan guessed that his size and build convinced Webb that Griff was one of the Shadow Broker’s enforcers; that Griff knew what he was talking about when discussing needed modifications to the station certainly didn’t hurt.
After listening to the progress report, I composed and sent a text message to Xiùlán’s secure communicator on the Hong Kong … I needed to speak with Miranda Lawson … ask her some questions concerning Cerberus, and ask about her sister. I knew that before I had joined the Normandy as a comms specialist, Commander Shepard had taken time out from her Collectors campaign to assist Miranda in rescuing her sister from Eclipse mercenaries on Ilium.

Then, during the latter stages of the Reaper war, we were tracking Kai Leng after his escape from Illium; the trail led us to Horizon, where we discovered a Cerberus-funded operation known as Sanctuary. It was only after clearing the lower levels of Cerberus soldiers, then Reaper spawn, that Shepard and her team discovered Kai Leng had managed to get away, after a physical altercation with Miranda … an encounter she survived, albeit with a few minor injuries.

She had traveled to Horizon to reclaim her sister from Henry Lawson, who had, with help from the Illusive Man, found and kidnapped her from her family. Shepard had been able to convince Henry Lawson to release Oriana in exchange for his own freedom; once she had a clear sightline, Miranda utilized her biotics to grant the rogue scientist’s desire, sending him flying through a window that looked out onto the research area dozens of meters below.

I had wondered what Oriana Lawson had been doing since that time; she had told Miranda she wanted to work in colony development. Personally, I believed she had the potential to become a phenomenal accountant for the Shadow Broker. I just needed to convince Miranda to let me speak with her.

A/N: The 15th of this month (August) will mark one year since I began this story; it seems to take over my brain at times, such that it's difficult to stop writing. My thanks to everyone for reading and especially those guests that have left kudos during the year. I realize this is a slow-moving tale, and fervently hope that, in spite of the lack of combat each month, everyone continues to enjoy the story!
A Pleasant Dinner With A Loyal Friend

If you do not consider yourself a testament to the impossible, let me help you understand: you are an assortment of atoms, carving out its very own fate with your stardust powered hands. — Nikita Gill

Ai – [愛 - love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘Luv’)

GST – Galactic Standard Time, standardized time system utilized by inhabitants of Citadel Council Space

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

Irín – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

NDA – Non-Disclosure Agreement, signed by Yuán Xiùlán and Samantha Traynor at Ø7 program termination

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.
  The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

Qíngfū – [情夫 – lover]

♦ AT LARGE, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

I did not have to wait long for Xiùlán to respond to my message … but, rather than simply texting me back, she had utilized the comms system on the Hong Kong in order to contact me openly. Seeing her smiling face lifted my spirits like nothing else could; hearing her lightly-accented voice say my name caused a hot pulse of desire to charge straight through my core. “Sà mǐ … what can I do for you, wǒ de ài?” [我的愛 – my love]

“Hearing my name on your lips? … seeing your face? … you just made getting out of bed this morning so totally worth it! Where are you, darling?”

“Not supposed to tell you that, even over a secure connection, Sà mǐ.” With a light chuckle, she added, “I can tell you we’re somewhere in the Attican Traverse.”

“That’s an awfully damned big expanse of galaxy, Ai.” I looked down for a moment as I thought of what I needed to say. Returning my gaze to her sable-brown eyes—rendered nearly black on my small screen—I explained why I contacted her. “I’d like to speak with Miranda for a few minutes, if I may. I need to see if she’ll give me the contact information for her sister.”

“Oriana? Why do you? …” she started to ask, before thinking better of it. With a cheeky grin, she said, “Standby … I’ll have Ms Lawson come down here from the CIC.”

While I waited, I told her of the extraordinary capabilities of my new Serrice omnitool. When I told her how much it had cost me, she frowned for a moment, then brightened. “I should be able to get the Alliance to foot the bill for that, Sà mǐ. Their Ø7 program is the reason I have this one. They certainly cannot deny me a needed upgrade.”

“Your current tool will have to be replaced, Luv. It doesn’t possess the required interface hardware to accept their current software upgrades, so you’ll need to travel to Thessia. Oh … and Mallene Calis asked about you … she would really love to see you after so much time.”
“I'll give the matter some serious thought, Sà mǐ.” Xiùlán looked away for a moment, then returned her attention to me. “Miranda is here. I'll leave so you two can have a bit of privacy. ‘Nǐ de ài shī wǒ de shēnghuó wánzhèngle!’ [你的愛使我的生活完整了 – Your love makes my life complete!]

Miranda’s face appeared in place of Xiùlán’s on my monitor; unlike Xiùlán’s greeting of a few minutes before, Miranda’s was much more reserved. “Ms Traynor. What can I do for you?”

“It’s Sammy, Specialist … and may I call you Miranda? Or Mirī?”

Her response seemed to come grudgingly. “Either one will be fine, Sammy.”

*Now comes the difficult part.* “I’m on the hunt for former Cerberus assets, galaxy-wide. Any insight you can offer would be greatly appreciated.”

Her expression hardened at my mention of Cerberus. “Why?”

Choosing my words carefully, I replied, “For your protection, and mine, I cannot answer that particular question, Miranda, without giving you a lot more information than I wish to share.”

Miranda sighed heavily, looked down for several moments, then returned her gaze to me. “Ms Traynor, just before I joined the Navy, I shared everything I knew about Cerberus with Captain Yuán. I have no knowledge of any facilities that are not in the Horsehead Nebula … Jack Harper kept all their locations secret to prevent any one research cell or development cluster from knowing too much about his operations.”

My next question brought a look of astonished surprise to her face; this quickly gave way to suspicion as I asked, “Would it be possible for you to tell me where your sister resides, Miranda?”

“Ori? For her own safety, I haven’t contacted her since we rescued her from Henry Lawson on Horizon. Why do you need to know? What do you need from her?”

“You must be aware I have become an info and data broker, Miri. I’m recruiting people to work for me, and Oriana is every bit as talented and smart as you are. She would be a perfect fit for a position I need to fill.” I could see a negative reply coming, so quickly added, “Please don’t just say ‘NO’ in a knee-jerk reaction, Miranda. Think about it for a few moments? You know me. I will not place Ori in any position I wouldn’t place myself.”

“You have been trained in hand-to-hand, close-quarters combat techniques, Ms Traynor. Sandra Patton told me all about your actions when you accompanied her inside that Blue Suns rat’s nest in Delta Ward.” Miranda smiled grimly. “If anyone other than the master gunnery sergeant had told me such a thing, I would have laughed.” With a shake of her head, she asked, “So, why should I trust that you won’t get into a similar situation in the future?”

“Current circumstances prevent me from placing myself in that sort of position, Miri. As I just said, I am now an information and data broker, so I will not attempt to bullshit you about this … one should never say a thing or situation will never happen again, but … I don’t intend to ever need to wear my armor, or have any need to use my weapons again.” I gave her my best snarky grin. “Have a private chat with Xiùlán after we’re done talking. I believe you’re aware she’s my Qíngfū … my lover; she knows my mind … and my heart, better than anyone. I’ll ask her to tell you of our Ø7 mission to Cartagena Station.”

Miranda’s eyes went wide at the mention of that batarian run hellhole. “I wasn’t aware you knew of that place, much less had visited there.”
My grin disappeared as I thought of Xiùlán’s ordeal. “It wasn’t a visit. She and I, along with Buchan, were tasked with retrieving an ancient asari artifact stolen by the Blue Suns. Griff was captured by C-Pat and tortured for information. Xiùlán was …” I felt my eyes fill as I thought of her writhing in pain on a cold metal deck.

I knew Miri had seen the emotions playing out on my face when she narrowed her eyes and asked suspiciously, “Xiùlán told me a little of what happened there … so what the hell actually went down, Traynor? Must have been something really bad.”

I cleared my throat and continued softly, “Let’s just say the batarian population there was significantly less when we left. Ask Xiùlán about the scars on her left thigh … how she got them, and what I did to save her life and get all of us off that station. I fully intend to never put myself, nor anyone for whom I am responsible, in such a situation again … ever.”

Miranda frowned and shook her head slightly, a motion that likely would have been imperceptible had I not been studying her reactions so closely. After thinking on my words for several seemingly long moments, she finally responded. “Ori is all I have left in the entire galaxy, and I’ll do whatever is needed to keep her from harm. I don’t believe you’ve convinced me it’s safe for my sister to be associated with you, for any reason, so I hope you can understand my caution. You said it yourself; you can’t guarantee anything.”

“Understood, Miranda, and I appreciate your honesty. Please know that I will do whatever is necessary to keep her out of danger. Let me speak with Xiùlán … then, after you speak with her, call me, please … when you’ve come to a decision.”

Lawson nodded, then left to find her captain. In less than a minute, I was once again staring longingly at the image of my Inamorata. “I need another favor, Captain. I need you to speak with Miranda privately, off the record. She questions whether or not I can keep Oriana safe from harm, so I’d like you to tell her about our mission to Cartagena Station … specifically the lengths I went to in order to save your life and get the three of us extracted.”

Xiùlán looked down for a moment, then looked at me and asked, “Does she really need that information, Sà mÌ?"

“I’m afraid so; Miranda needs to be reassured about how seriously I take my responsibilities, so I need you to remind her of the scars on your thigh, which I believe she has already seen. Make her understand the impact that mission had on me … that I’m never going to undertake any missions like what we did back then … and that I’d never, ever place an untrained person like Ori in such a situation.”

The distressed sigh I received stabbed me in the heart. “It will be difficult, but I’ll tell her Sà mÌ … for you. I cannot promise what it will be, but you should have a response from her shortly.”

“Thank you darling! I know I’m asking a lot.” I smiled lovingly, hoping she could understand just how much I depended on her being there for me … for all the things in my life, not just this single request. “Fly safe, please? I love you … forever!” I terminated the link, leaned back in my chair and stretched my arms over my head. I had one more person I needed to speak with … someone I should have met with as soon as I resigned from the Navy.

While Buchanan oversaw the remodeling project for our new home and workplace, I had continued my search through all the Illusive Man’s records, downloaded by Irìngù-Eßizkur from Minuteman Station and Cronos Station during Liara’s search for Shepard’s clones.
The task wasn’t as difficult as it would seem at first glance; for now, I was looking only for records of conversations between Jack Harper and Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton, from the time he had been posted to Arcturus in 2159 to oversee the construction personnel—largely composed of Cerberus members, loyal to the ideals of the Illusive Man as much or more so than to the Alliance military—until his apparently fortuitous transfer to the diplomatic section of the Citadel, mere days before the Reapers plowed through Kite’s Nest, then through Arcturus Stream and Exodus on their way to Earth.

I suspected he had continued to deal with Jack Harper during the Reaper War … hell, he may have even been involved in planning the attempted coup, setting up Donnel Udina to take the fall should things go completely sideways. I would certainly look into that, but I couldn’t be sure of how much digging I needed to do until I spoke with my friend in Vancouver.

I also pulled conversations between the Illusive Man and Admiral Owen Fletcher. The number of years that vorcha’s asshole had been taking creds from Cerberus was actually a surprise to me. *Sonuvabitch was trying to terminate our program even before Xiülán and I were accepted. Shit!*

I felt fortunate that all of the Cerberus recordings were high-quality vids, with Harper and the person with whom he was speaking both visible in the frame. The holographic images—recorded from a position just above and behind Harper’s left shoulder—were crystal clear. There could be no doubt about the identity of either Fletcher, or Sutton. *Bastards!* As soon as I had the recordings between Fletcher and Harper and Sutton and Harper indexed, I copied them to a pair of OSDs, then placed a vid-call to my longtime friend.

I had masked my identity—normally not a good thing to do, since I really needed to speak with the woman—but she decided to answer my call anyway. I watched her jaw drop in surprise as the connection firmed up and she got a good look at me. “Samantha Traynor?” she gasped. “I had nearly given up on ever hearing from you again! How in the hell have you been!?”

“I’ve been good, General, and it’s really grand to hear your voice again … it’s been too long!”

RaeLee Park grinned at my image as she replied, “Too long doesn’t even begin to describe it, Sammy! I saw Xiülán right after she made captain, January of last year, but she was on an extremely tight schedule, and we couldn’t sit down and simply chat like I wanted us to do. Damn!” she gushed. “It is so good to see you and hear your voice!”

I chuckled, then got down to why I had called her. “I’d like to take you to dinner … my treat! … wherever you want to go. I need to speak with you … about old times.”

She hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Tonight? Are you here on Earth, Sammy?”

“No, but I can be there in plenty of time for dinner. Just pick a place and tell me where to pick you up. I’m a civilian now, so I don’t know if I can enter the base in a personal UT-47a.”

That surprised her. “A civilian? When did? … never mind. We can catch up on everything while we eat, Sammy. It’ll be wonderful to see you and talk with you again!” She typed something into her omnitool, then returned her attention to me. “I just sent the guards at the transient shuttle park a notice to allow you into the yard. Send me your shuttle’s ident code as soon as you can. I look forward to hearing from you once you’re in Earth orbit.”

“Sounds good, General. See you soon.”
I had stopped at our apartment on the Citadel to change my clothes – I was going to completely stun General Park by wearing my China blue and red plum shift dress and my black suede, over-the-knee boots, paired with a matching shoulder bag. My hair had grown out so much since I’d resigned my commission, so I simply parted it in the middle and left it loose on the sides, where it flowed just past the top of my shoulders.

This shuttle, even considering it had once belonged to Cerberus, was really responsive. I was aware the paint job wasn’t the only thing Cordell Webb’s vehicle and spacecraft technicians had taken care of; the shuttle’s reaction to control inputs was almost to the point of being twitchy, and by eliminating the rear seating row and relocating that bulkhead forward, they were able to increase the amount of space available for the eezo core, thus increasing its top speed. I made a mental note to run a comparison on the return trip.

The trip to Earth orbit, even with the detour and stop on the Citadel, had only taken about four hours. Once I was over Vancouver, I contacted Alliance approach control, gave them the ident I had transmitted to RaeLee when I left Strenuus, and requested an approach vector to the field. Once that was received and entered, I slaved it to my navi-computer and sat back to enjoy the ride.

I resumed manual control as I approached the entrance to the field; at an altitude of five meters and a ground speed of 2.5 meters/second, I guided the craft to the indicated parking space and set it on the pavement. With the exception of the core, I shut everything down, then opened the port side hatch; I was surprised to discover a pair of Marines waiting to escort me inside to Parks’ office suite. From their expressions, I guessed they were surprised to see a woman in civilian attire. The sergeant indicated a path delineated by yellow stripes, saying, “This way, Ma’am.”

I remotely locked the shuttle with a mental command through my omnitool, then walked ahead of the Marines to a familiar looking building. Once inside, I turned to walk past the receptionist’s desk, only to be brought up short by the sergeant saying, “Please, wait here, Ma’am. The general will be right out.”

In only a few minutes, General Park walked briskly down the passageway, beaming from ear-to-ear. She stopped in front of me for a moment, then totally surprised me by throwing her arms around me just as I raised my arms to grab her forearms. After hugging me like a long-lost daughter, she pushed back and said, “Damn, child! You look absolutely stunning!”

“Looks like we both survived the war relatively unscathed,” I grinned. “Do you have a restaurant in mind? Shall we go? … It’s been a few hours since I ate lunch, and I’ve worked up quite an appetite.”

RaeLee responded by hooking an arm through mine and walking us both towards a side exit. “This way, Sammy. Since you’re buying dinner, least I can do is get us there. I have a pilot standing by with a speeder.”

I knew it would do no good to protest, and I trusted this woman completely. “Lead on, General.”

♦ HARBORSIDE BISTRO & LOUNGE, VANCOUVER, BC ♦

RaeLee and I sat together in the rear of the aircar—a stretched model, built to accommodate four people in relative comfort behind a single pilot’s position—where she pointed out a few of the city sights in the early evening twilight. We arrived at our destination in just under fifteen minutes; the Harborside Bistro & Lounge was situated on the south shore of Vancouver Harbor, among a cluster of reconstructed businesses and high-end condos. As it turned out, RaeLee was a regular patron; we were ushered past a few people waiting in a queue for admission inside, to be seated at
a table that seemed slightly isolated; close enough to be seen by the maître d’, yet far enough away from other diners to allow us to have an intimate conversation.

After setting a printed menu and filled water glass in front of each of us, the waitress left to check on other diners. When we were alone, RaeLee remarked, “I always knew a real woman lurked under all that muscle, Sammy; I just never expected to see you display your feminine side. I mean, just … Damn! You really clean up nice!” She took a swallow of water and picked up her menu as she concluded with a question. “So, is this your normal attire, or do you still wear SDUs?”

I chuckled at her question. “My standard, everyday wardrobe is the civilian equivalent of an SDU, Ma’am.” I placed a hand in the center of my chest as I continued, “I picked this up … and the boots, to impress Xiûlán.” Blushing slightly, I added, “She was much more than impressed.”

She studied me closely from across the table as she asked, “So … you resigned from the Alliance Navy … how long ago?”

“Several months. It was an easy decision to make. Admiral Hackett and Captain Cody …”

“Bill Cody? He’s captain of Normandy now, correct?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Neither of them would clear the redactions from my personal record, and they wanted me to volunteer for … a position, so they could take advantage of me some more. I told them I was done running errands for an organization that didn’t give a damn about me or my accomplishments and handed my resignation to Cody.” I took a sip of water, then considered the menu in front of me for a few moments before returning my gaze to General Park. “Since then, I’ve become a data broker, in partnership with Griffen Buchanan.” I closed my menu and sat back as the waitress reappeared.

“Would either of you care for a beverage? Are you ready to order?”

I smiled up at the perky little blonde, saying, “I’ll have a whisky with a splash of lime to start. For dinner, I’d like the mid-sized Filet Mignon, medium rare, with the buttermilk mashed potatoes and veggies … oh, and a basket of onion rings.”

“Would you like a glass of wine with your meal.”

I indicated RaeLee with a nod of my head. “I’ll let my guest choose a bottle for us.

“Very good, Ma’am.” She turned towards RaeLee with a questioning look. “General?”

Park smiled as she said, “I’d like a scotch and soda. For dinner, I’ll have the Manhattan Steak, done medium rare, with the bacon horseradish mashed potatoes and vegetables. And I think a bottle of your Poplar Grove Cabernet Franc would go quite nicely with our dinners.”

“Excellent choices, General.” She picked up our menus, said, “I’ll be right back with your drinks,” turned and quietly moved away from our table.

RaeLee fixed me with the practiced gaze of a Marine Corp general used to extracting information from someone looking to tell less than the whole truth. “Now, why in the hell did you appear, seemingly out of dark space, after all this time? You’ve been separated from the Alliance for months, for what I can only assume are the flimsiest of reasons, and yet, you come to see me.”

The young waitress returned, set a scotch and soda in front of General Park, and a whiskey—with an honest-to-gosh slice of lime on the rim—in front of me; both were in fine crystal tumblers that I felt gave too much cachet to their humble contents. She also placed a basket of onion rings
between us. As the waitress left, I helped myself to an onion ring, then removed the lime slice and sipped a bit of what I discovered was an exceptionally smooth drink.

Setting my glass down, I looked straight into RaeLee’s eyes and replied, “You must be aware that Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton was transferred to the diplomatic section on the Citadel …” I continued on hurriedly before she could interrupt me, “… a move that almost seems to have been made based on a premonition that the Reapers were within days of blowing through Kite’s Nest on their way to Arcturus and Earth.”

She took a sip from her own glass, swallowed, then chuckled. “I wasn’t aware he had left Arcturus, Sammy.” She frowned slightly as she continued, “It would seem you’re carrying a grudge concerning Sutton. My question, now you’re no longer in the Navy, is why?”

I had taken another sip from my drink as she spoke. With a grimace, I hissed, “A grudge? You’re goddamned right I’m carrying a grudge!” After another sip from my glass, I continued on. “That dirty sonuvabitch got away from that station without being held accountable for any of his crimes against the Alliance, crimes he continued to commit during the war, until Commander Shepard convinced Jack Harper to eat a bullet on the Crucible!” I took another sip of whiskey in an attempt to soothe my anger. “Once on the Citadel, it’s quite likely he helped engineer the attempted kidnapping and murder of the Council members; I’d bet he then allowed Udina to take the fall after Shepard kicked Cerberus in their ruddy ballocks.” I took a breath, then concluded, “The fucking bastard was in Jack Harper’s hip pocket for years, and I have all the proof needed to get him a death sentence for high treason, RaeLee.”

That surprised her. “Samantha, how in hell? …” she trailed off for a moment, then said, “Your so-called proof would need to stand up in a military court, Sammy. Innuendo and hearsay won’t get him convicted.” She took a bite from an onion ring, set it on a dish as she chewed and swallowed. “Sutton has a lot of friends, Sammy … but, he also has more than a few enemies.”

Our waitress and a helper came to our table bearing our dinners; she cautioned us the plates were hot as she deftly set them down. The wine steward appeared as the waitress departed; after uncorking the bottle and pouring a taste for the general to sample, he poured a full helping for each of us, set the open bottle on the table and left.

I wasn’t about to let our discussion spoil my appetite; I cut a piece from my steak and discovered that it literally melted in my mouth. After a few more bites of dinner, I returned to the subject at hand. “I’d like a list of those you consider to be that man’s enemies, Ma’am, soon as you can manage it. And what would you say to vid-recordings of conversations between Jack Harper and Garrett Sutton? Before you answer, you need to know I have all the records … every last thing that Jack Harper touched, fondled, kissed or even breathed on … since he founded Cerberus … and I mean everything.” I finished my whiskey, then applied myself to my dinner; I could see that General Park was mulling over what I had just revealed.

Park continued to enjoy her meal between sips of wine. “Why bring this to me, Sammy?” She refilled her wine glass, then added a bit to mine.

“Because, I don’t know anyone at the top of the chain that’s more committed to the truth than you, RaeLee. I also want to make sure that, when the hammer falls, you won’t be caught by any of the blowback … I refuse to see my friends hurt when the rug is pulled out from under Sutton!” I placed a forkful of potatoes, followed by some veggies, in my mouth and chewed as I continued to think about bringing Sutton down; then my thoughts drifted to Fletcher.

“I also need to share something a lot closer to your own backyard.”
A forkful of steak on its way to her mouth paused for a moment, then continued on to its target. After chewing and swallowing, she replied, “Shit! You seem hell-bent on giving me indigestion, Sammy.” After taking a sip of wine, she nodded. “Okay … let’s have it.”

I smirked at her; taking a sip from my own glass, I said, “Remember Owen Fletcher?” At her look of recognition, I continued, “I have recordings of Jack Harper in conversations with a naughty … a very naughty … Admiral Owen Fletcher, RaeLee … including the one in which Jack ordered him to engineer the elimination of Michael Moser Lang … after Fletcher gave the mutherfucker information concerning my whereabouts.”

I had her undivided attention now. “As we guessed at the time, Lang wasn’t paid his expected bonus, simply because the Illusive Man had to pay Fletcher triple his normal fee to keep him from stopping the plot to destroy the MSV Anixara; additionally, Fletcher convinced the other members of Alliance Command to terminate your pet program, and transfer us off to our chosen fields. Forcing us to sign NDAs was simply icing on the cake for him … if we couldn’t talk about it, there wouldn’t be any consequences for him to deal with.”

Her look of amazement at this revelation was priceless. When she finally found her voice, she quietly said, “When you and I spoke—just after Lang’s attempt on your life, then after your confrontation with Kelsey Winters—you told me Fletcher was dirty. I still have all the data you forwarded to me from Arcturus, Sammy. What I did not have then was recordings of his conversations with the Illusive Man.” She swallowed the last bit of wine from her glass. “You have the entire record? … going all the way back to when he began taking Cerberus credits?”

“He was too late to stop us from retrieving the lost asari figurine from the Blue Suns … that’s how long he was a damned puppet dancing to Jack Harper’s credits tune.” I finished up the last bit of food on my plate and the wine in my glass, then quietly added, “You know, I even have enough evidence against the Alliance concerning my own situation that I could hire a smart lawyer and sue the lot of ‘em for every goddamned credit they possess … and probably win!”

With a stunned look of shock, she whispered, “My God, Sammy! You wouldn’t dare … please tell me you aren’t seriously considering …”

I smirked as I answered, “No, I’m not … not only because I don’t wish to see you dragged through the inevitable shit-storm that would ensue, but also because I cannot afford to have my identity revealed to the galaxy at large.”

The waitress reappeared to ask if we would care for desert or needed anything else. Seeing a negative indication from RaeLee, I also declined, holding my hand out for the bill instead.

RaeLee said, “I know that’s a pretty hefty tab, Sammy. You sure you don’t want …”

I interrupted her with a grin. “I told you this was my treat, General. Just sit back and accept it.”

Shaking her head slightly, she replied, “I accept. But, just so we’re clear, next time is my treat!”

I chuckled wickedly. “In that case, I’ll bring Xiùlán along with me … maybe even Griff … the man sometimes seems to possess a hollow leg! And you can’t simply take the plate away from him … at least, not without the risk of having your arm chewed off.”

Park reacted by laughing out loud. I grinned at her, happy to see she was still in good spirits after all the unpleasant news I had just shared with her. I mentally activated my omnitool and transferred the required credits to the restaurant’s account, an action that did not escape the general’s notice.
“How did you do that, Sammy? You didn’t touch your bracelet or make any entries once it was activated.”

“It’s a replacement for the Serrice omnitool I was given during the Ø7 program, General. This one has their latest developments, based on Shepard’s choice to end the war … it’s actually tied into my nervous system. I can perform a lot of functions by simply thinking of what I want it to do.” With a rueful look, I added, “Damned thing is really expensive, but the increase in performance over my previous omnitool is well worth the cost.” I stood from the table and shoved my chair in. “Shall we?” I could see General Park had lots of questions and was happy she didn’t ask them. I had too much respect for her to lie; I expected I could completely trust her, but I had shared the secret of my new profession with too many people already.

Thinking about my new job title was making me paranoid; I could feel numerous eyes watching me as I walked towards the exit. Park must have picked up on my thoughts, as she commented, “You know, Sammy … you really cut a striking figure in that dress. Not that you’d ever notice them, but you’re getting a lot of admiring looks from the men in this place.” She showed her teeth in a huge grin. “And a few not so admiring looks from the women accompanying those men.”

I smiled at that … it was nice to know I wasn’t being targeted by some assassin. “Once we’re back on the base, I’d like to accompany you to your office, if you don’t mind. I have a couple of gifts for you, and I think it better to hand them to you there so you can place them in your safe.”

“You brought the records with you?” came the surprised question. I nodded as her speeder came to a stop in front of us. Once we were in and on our way back to the base, I relaxed ever so slightly. I wanted nothing more than for General Park to have the two OSDs I was carrying in my shoulder bag; once in her possession, she could keep them secure from prying eyes. “I hope you can make a case for having any of the credits that were disbursed following Fletcher’s suicide returned to the Alliance … although I don’t hold out much hope. At the least, you should be able to convince the brass that the Ø7 program was wrongfully terminated.”

“I’ll certainly look at that when the time comes, Sammy … and your assumption about the program may just prove to be correct. Unfortunately, I expect the Alliance will play bloody hell attempting to claw back those credits.”

Back in her office on base, I produced the pair of OSDs from my shoulder bag. “Keep these safe, General. They’re copies, but the harm they could do in the wrong hands is incalculable.”

Taking them over to her desk, she sat down and turned to the safe on the floor beside her. “I’ll take a look at these over the next couple of days, Sammy.” She had opened the heavy door while speaking over her shoulder; setting the OSDs on a shelf within, she closed and relatched it. “In the meantime, I’ll draw up a list of the brass unhappy with Garrett Sutton and send it to you as soon as I can.” She actually smirked. “Perhaps we don’t need to be actively involved in bringing the bastard down, Sammy. I’m sure someone wouldn’t mind ending his life.”

“As satisfying as that would be for me personally, that’s not what I want to see, General. He realized during our meeting in his office on Arcturus that I could have killed him, and he would have never seen it coming. I do want him brought low, certainly … but he needs to suffer consequences for his actions … his collusion with Cerberus. And believe me, when he’s been stripped of his rank and publicly humiliated, then drop-kicked out of the Alliance, I’ll make sure he knows who to thank for his fall from grace … you can count on it.”
RaeLee stood and moved, stopping in front of me. “Samantha, I knew you were special the first
time I met you. Damned if you haven’t proved my faith in you, hot temper and all.” With a small
grin, she surprised me by wrapping her arms around me in an embrace that was more than just a
friendly farewell. I hugged her back, enjoying the contact. When she pushed back, there were
tears in her eyes. “I know you cannot … or dare not … tell me what you’re actually doing,
Sammy, but whatever it is …” she sniffled. “Whatever it is, stay safe out there, please? It would
break my heart if I learned of your death, no matter the cause.”

I smiled at that. “Breaking your heart? Think about Xiülán’s heart. I wouldn’t wish to put her
through that misery, and I don’t wish for you to suffer that distress either.” As I turned to leave,
she stepped up beside me. “I’ll walk with you, Specialist.”

I was surprised at that. “I’m not …” I began, only to have the general contradict me.

“You will always be a Specialist to me, Samantha. Come on …”

♦ AT LARGE, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Upon exiting the Pax system relay and passing close by Noveria on my way to the Strenuus
system, I thought briefly about Liara’s mother, her mind in thrall to a soulless Reaper. Regrettfully,
in order to free her, Shepard had been forced to end her life. Helluva choice.

It was late … early morning, actually, and the navi-computer pegged my best time to
Ahn’Kahar
Station at 85-95 minutes. A Kodiak’s best FTL velocity was certainly no match for a frigate like
the
Normandy, but after checking the numbers against factory-fresh specs for the type, I
discovered this shuttlecraft was actually exceeding its own specs by a good 8 or 9 percent. Looks
like the bigger eezo core back there really did increase the output from the FTL drive, I mused.

Since I only needed to monitor my progress between the two systems, I leaned back in my seat and,
ignoring the fact I was not wearing pants, placed my booted feet up on the edge of the panel.
Feeling a hint of cool air against the backs of my now exposed and very bare thighs, I chuckled. I
bet I look like a real lady with my bum hanging out in the wind! Good thing Xiülán isn’t here …
or Griff! Hell, he’d be turning all sorts of shades of pink while trying to keep his eyes off me! And
Xiülán … I mentally shrugged my shoulders … no one in here but me … I could actually run
around completely naked if I wished.

I must have been dozing; I jerked awake at the sound of a proximity alarm. The navi-computer
responded by slowing to sub-light velocities. I replanted my feet on the deck and sat up in my
chair; re-taking manual control, I sent a query to the station’s AI, requesting a vector to the hangar
bay. Once that was received, all I had to do was follow the indicated course to my new home.

With a thought, I engaged the virtual viewports. Studying the station as it slowly grew larger in
my forward viewscreen, I looked intently at Iringù-Elǐzkur’s form. She had positioned herself on
the station’s exterior in such a way that it was difficult to see her as something that didn’t belong.

Seeing how well her form blended in with the structure made me feel a bit better, but I knew in my
heart she couldn’t stay there indefinitely; someone, sometime, would see her and wonder why in
hell a damned Reaper was parked on this station. I had to think of a logical reason to get her off
the station, or else Buchanan and I would be in the same situation as on the Citadel.

The hangar bay was open by the time I was within a half-klick of the entrance; I allowed the
shuttle’s VI to assist me in making a smooth entry and touchdown, then shut everything down as
the massive door slid closed behind me. Griff and I had debated about simply leaving the access
doors open continuously; our decision was made when Cordell Webb pointed out the advantage in energy savings of not running kinetic isolation barriers continuously, along with a gain in security by not having a brightly-lit and heated hangar advertising itself to anyone passing by.

I sent a text to Griff, telling him of my arrival; he messaged back to say he was just going to bed. Good to know … that’s where I needed to be as well. I powered the lights down, then rode the lift to Deck Zero. After checking my personal terminal for messages, I entered my quarters, got undressed and crawled into bed. It had been a really long, but highly satisfying day.
Agents and Researchers

Queens: “What is a queen without a king?” I don’t know, but let’s ask Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Hatshepsut, Sammuramat, Victoria, Elizabeth, mina, Tzu-hsi, and the countless other kingdomless queens who turned mere empires into the greatest of empires. – Nikita Gill, Dragonhearts

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)
Inrin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’
Mered’vai Rannoch – Forget Rannoch (Khelish/Source: Mass Effect Wiki)
RCS – Reaction Control System: a spacecraft system that uses thrusters to provide station-keeping in orbit
Siame – “One who is all”, a loved one cherished above all others (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Waking up, it took a few moments for me to reorient myself to my new location. Ahn’Kahar Station … our new headquarters. With a thought, I had my omnitool send an inquiry to Iringù-Eßizkur: »What is your status?«

After a moment, she responded through the console on the table next to my bed. »Nominal, Shadow Broker.< After a brief pause, she asked, »How are you texting so rapidly?«

»I have a new omnitool, Irin. It’s connected to my nervous system, allowing me to simply think about what I need it to accomplish. It’s quite extraordinary.«

Irin’s ‘voice’ sounded puzzled. »It seems strange to receive your thoughts in this manner … it is almost as if you are connected directly to my processor. I anticipate this will be an improvement in our communications.«

»Try sending text to my omnitool, Irin.«

Within seconds, the bracelet activated as it received, »Is this what you desired?«

»Exactly, Irin. I can see that this will be beneficial in the future.«

»Does Buchanan-Griffen have the same capability? «

»He does, but he’ll have to become accustomed to using his new omnitool.« I paused, then sent, »I have to sign off – I need to get my day started – lots of things I need to do.«

»I will be standing by. «

I threw my covers back and stood, stretched my arms over my head as high as I could, then shed my sleepshirt and moved into my bathroom. There were seemingly a million things I needed to accomplish today. Better get started.
gotten used to having the additional space, especially Buchanan, who had seemingly never had a bunk, rack or bed that was sized generously enough for him … at least, not until we began our new career on Iringù-Eßizkur.

Pointing to his bracelet, I queried, “Have you been exploring the functions available to you on that thing?”

He scrunched up his face, an expression I had learned to recognize as a combination of frustration and unhappiness. “It’s been hard, Sammy. I’m so damned used to simply activating it by hand, I don’t stop to think about it before I’ve done it.” He grinned sheepishly. “I’ll keep trying.”

I raised my hands. “No pressure, big guy. But, as long as we’re talking, I want you to try something. Think about sending a text to Irin … ask her about her current status.”

He raised an eyebrow, then looked at his wrist for a moment. Within seconds, his omnitool activated with its characteristic purple-tinged ultraviolet glow. Griff read the message, then looked at me. “That’s … nothing short of amazing, Sammy! She reports she is nominal.”

I grinned at him. “Practice doing that as much as possible, Griff … I’d like it to become second nature, to both of us. There are many times when a console for Irin to ‘speak’ through won’t be available, and having her voice reverberating around us — like when Žiuk’Durmah spoke to us on the Normandy? — would be intolerable. Being able to silently and rapidly text back and forth may save our asses someday.”

After a sip of coffee, Griff changed the subject. “While we’re talking, I would like you, or someone with computer programming knowledge, to take a look at the programming for this station’s security and environmental functions.”

“Some problem I’m unaware of?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on and say ‘that’s it!’, Sammy, but I get the distinct feeling there may be something … I dunno … maybe a degree or two off kilter in there.” He frowned as he thought about it. “You know, it is Cerberus programming. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I would really feel better about trusting my life on this station if someone could do a bit of digging.” He finished his coffee, then admitted, “I’d rather the source code had come from the Reapers … er, sorry, Irin!… if you’re listening, I meant no offense.”

The nearby console came to life. ›Actually, I take your last statement as a compliment, Buchanan-Griffen. Many were the instances of Harper-Illusive Man appropriating our programming for Cerberus’ own purposes. Normandy-Frigate has a fair amount of so-called Reaper programming in its servers‹. The way Irin said ‘Reapers’ indicated a great deal of distaste at the title, although she didn’t bother to correct Griff’s use of the word.

I looked at Buchanan and commented, “That programming was one of the reasons Normandy could fly among the Repositories during the start of the invasion … and afterwards. The ship pinged as just another Repository.” Thinking about the station’s computer and the Normandy, I said, “What we need is someone with the ability to accurately parse through millions of lines of code without missing something … someone like Edie Coré … it’d actually be great to have her here to take on that task, but I seriously doubt Captain Cody would be willing to part with her.”

With a chuckle I added, “Hell, Joker would probably blow a gasket!”

Thinking about the organic/mechanical hybrid woman, I said, “Her existence is a consequence of Cerberus crossing the VI that Shepard disabled on Luna with tech salvaged from Sovereign; I expect she’d possess an innate understanding of any and all code written by Cerberus
I picked up my dishes and placed them in the sink. “Would you mind washing up? I’m going to do a bit of research; I’m also going to check on Normandy’s status … see if it’s on the way to Sigurd’s Cradle.”

He made shooing motions with his hands as he said, “I’ll take care of it.”

I contacted Zus’kann Solban in full Broker mode; his nervous answer was met by me demanding he find someone well-versed in dealing with mundane computer programming. I was actually surprised at his response. “I know of a quarian computer engineer … best programmer I’ve ever encountered. She’s just finishing up with a contract job for Synthetic Insights on Illium. I can instruct her to be ready for transport by this time tomorrow.”

“Transmit her dossier … I will decide her suitability for the task I need to have done. Should I find she is up to the job, I will send a vessel to retrieve her.”

Solban stammered a response. “Sir … the quarian … she is, well … please understand …”

“Out with it, Solban!” I thundered. “What is the problem? Is she available or not?”

“My apologies, Sir. It’s just that Synthetic Insights owns her contract, from which she will need to be released before she will be permitted to leave Illium.”

“I see.” I really didn’t understand why the cowering salarian would even tell me about this quarian if she was an indentured servant … which was really just a more civilized term for a slave. “If she is as good as you claim, be sure to send a copy of her contract along with her dossier.”

“Yes, Sir! You’ll have all the information in a few minutes.”

I cut the connection without replying. The Broker—meaning Liara—had really been lax with her agents during the war … not that I could blame her. What the ’ell do I have to do, stick his horns in a damned grinder to get his attention? I chuckled at the mental picture that came to mind as a chime sounded from my secure receiver. Looks like Zus’kann Solban sent everything I requested, came the thought as I glanced through the many pages of data just received.

The quarian’s name was Chinami’Taelas nar Jellicoe; like so many of her race, she had gone to Illium for her pilgrimage, where things had not gone as smoothly as she’d envisioned. Her debts had been paid by Synthetic Insights, which signed her to a rather restrictive contract of indentured servitude in 2185. Despite the Reapers attacking the planet’s population centers in 2187—most notably, Nos Astra—she had managed to survive, and her contract would be paid in full by end of the day, local time on Illium.

Upon reviewing her qualifications, I discovered that, if anything, Solban had understated her capabilities; she was a programming genius … as near as I could determine, her abilities were on par with those of Tali’Zorah. I need to find out if she’s going to return to the Fleet or Rannoch … I think she’d be a great addition to my team.

I called Zus’kann Solban once again; when he answered, my only words were, “Inform Chinami’Taelas there will be a transport waiting for her at 0900 local. The pilot will have all the information she needs to make a choice between returning to the fleet and working for me.”

The salarian replied in a shaky voice. “What if the quarian wishes to return to her homeworld?”
“She will have that opportunity, Solban, but …” I paused for several moments. “… will she have any funds, after spending the previous three-plus years in servitude to Synthetic Insights?”

Solban’s expression shifted subtly. “She will have, at most, enough credits for one-way passage off Illium, but I highly doubt she’ll be able to afford a trip all the way to Rannoch.”

“Send me her contact information. My pilot will need it in order to inform her of the dock where she will be picked up.”

“Right away, Sir. I’ll inform her of our arrangements.”

“And Solban … do not mention for whom she may be working.”

“Yes Sir.”

I terminated the call and leaned back in my chair. While I waited for Solban to send the quarian’s contact info, I looked through her contract a bit closer. Being dextro-amino-acid-based meant I would have to lay in specialty rations sufficient to keep her well-fed; in short order, I had a list of the food and liquid requirements she had stipulated as necessary to keep her healthy. I suspected the foods were the bare essentials … none of it appeared to be very appetizing; as my Inamorata was Chinese, I had gained a real appreciation for a mostly vegetarian diet from her.

If she was going to be working on this station long-term, I would also need to modify one of the residential suites to meet her physical requirements for a sterile environment in which to remove her enviro-suit for short periods … mostly so she could bathe and sleep. That can wait until I know she’ll be staying here for more than a few days.

Knowing I had a bit of time, I opened up an inquiry on Ugrolya Rarfenak, the batarian that had stiffed K’ath Din’sari out of her finder’s fee for setting up a meeting between him and pirate captain Kryllê Ghydgryz. Near as I could figure, K’ath should have been paid between 1 and 2 percent of Rarfenak’s fee … roughly 19 to 20 thousand credits out of his 1.3 million.

What I was searching for now was proof that Ghydgryz, still living a very low-key life on Omega, had neglected to pay the required transaction fee to Aria T’Loak. The blue queen’s fees were not onerous, especially considering Aria’s normal penalty for scofflaws involved shoving them out an airlock without benefit of a pressure suit.

What I intended to do, once I had the proof I needed, was have my agent on Omega inform Aria of the omission by placing blame on the war, and suggest that a 10 percent fee—130000 creds—collected late would make up for the normal 2.5 percent plus penalties and interest. Of course, a finder’s fee of 2.5 percent—32,500 creds—would need to be added to the 130,000 fee, in addition to the fee due the Broker for sharing this discovery. In total, Ugrolya Rarfenak would have to part with at least 162,500 credits. I had no doubt Aria would extract the Broker’s fee from the batarian as well, putting his total payment … or loss, depending on the viewpoint … at close to a quarter-million credits. I hope Rarfenak invested that 1.3 million creds wisely, or he’ll be a pauper once Aria is done extracting her fees … and ours.

If I could pull this off and keep the Brokerage above the fray, K’ath might finally receive some long overdue payment for nearly getting herself killed by the turian I had killed in her former apartment on Omega. Wonder how long his carcass remained in there before someone found ‘im, came the thought. Bet they played hell purging the smell from that place. Thinking of K’ath prompted me to begin a search for her on the Citadel … a relatively easy task, since I already had the location for her apartment and workplace.
I entered all the data concerning the original sale of the asari figurine to the Blue Suns, then tasked the processor with determining if the Omega transaction fee had, in fact, been paid. Since all of this took place prior to the Reaper war, records might contain gaps, or be missing entirely. *No guarantee I’ll find what I’m looking for, even with the assets of the Shadow Broker.* In spite of potential gaps in the financial records, I had every confidence I’d be able to determine the truth of the matter, one way or another.

With Aria already in my thoughts, I took another look at raw ore prices for eezo, and the refined product. After a few minutes of research, it was quite clear that the market for the refined material had stabilized somewhat, although it was still below its previous level, meaning someone was still profiting from sales of illicitly obtained, starship-grade refined eezo. *If I can assist Aria T’Loak in regaining her former near monopoly in refined sales, I may find myself credits ahead when she takes on the problem of Ugrolya Rarfenak’s delinquent transaction fees.*

After setting up the search for Rarfenak’s financials, Aria’s transactions receipts, and a search for whoever was still undercutting her eezo sales, I moved to a second terminal, this time to check my incoming messages, both as the Shadow Broker, and as private citizen Samantha Traynor. Of some surprise was a message received from Miranda on the *Hong Kong.* She had sent me contact information, and a location for her sister Oriana, with an admonishment that I was to allow no harm to befall her, or I would pay dearly. *One thing at a time, Miranda. Have to contact her first, see if she’ll agree to work with me.*

Oriana was living on Eden Prime; she had moved there shortly after the war’s conclusion to assist colony leadership with developing a profitable business model for the colony. After nearly a year of hard work, she had successfully established a regular exchange of agricultural goods for industrial products too expensive to produce in the colony. Even before settling there, she had heard all the stories about Cerberus atrocities during the early stages of the war, particularly after they excavated their way into the ancient Prothean vault shortly before the Reapers invaded. That discovery was the catalyst for a Cerberus takeover and occupation of the small colony, with the colonists—those that weren’t murdered outright—relocated to other parts of the planet for their own safety.

Commander Shepard’s discovery of computer files related to those relocations were directly responsible for the colonists’ revolt … the Spectre’s intervention had weakened Cerberus’ position on the planet. Once the colonists learned the truth about Cerberus, they banded together, took up arms and kicked the soldiers out of their colony and off the planet. By the end of the war, the Prothean vault had been resealed and the excavated soil used to fill in the huge dig site.

After checking local time at the colony—it was early evening—I placed a call to Oriana as myself, without the Shadow Broker theatrics. Seeing her face on my monitor was all the proof I needed that the woman was a genetic twin to Miranda Lawson. “Oriana Lawson? … my name is Samantha Traynor. I got your contact information from your sister.”

“*Miranda? Is she well? Has something happened? …*”

I interrupted her questions before my mention of her sister could send her into a panic. “She is in very good health, Ms Lawson, and quite safe. She’s working on the Alliance frigate *Hong Kong* as their comms specialist. She gave me your contact info only because I asked for it.”

With a relieved sigh, she said, “*If she gave you my contact info, then she must trust you; and it’s good to hear she’s well … I’m never sure with Miranda, ya know? She always seemed to be involved in business that was … less than safe. She doesn’t communicate with me very often … says it’s to keep me secure.*” She chuckled before continuing, “*As if I’m the one doing all the*
dangerous stuff.”

I smiled at this. Xiùlán had told me just a bit about Miranda’s adventures in Vancouver after the war, and it sounded as if Ori had no knowledge of Miri’s experiences … and injuries … at the hands of the Blue Suns. Getting to the point of my call, I said, “I understand you’re living comfortably on Eden Prime … that you have a good job, with people that like you.”

I looked straight at her image on my monitor. “That said, I have a proposition for you, Ms Lawson. I’m in need of a person with your talents, your knowledge … for a full-time position as an accountant. If you’re willing, I would like to meet with you personally, either on Eden Prime, or a location of your choosing, to discuss the particulars … just name the time and place.” Her brows instantly knotted together as she thought about my request. After several seconds, I prompted, “Think it over, Ms Lawson … take your time, then call me back with your reply.”

A relieved expression replaced the knitted brows. “Thank you, Ms Traynor. I appreciate you reaching out to me, and will certainly give the matter some serious thought.” A brief pause, then, “I have to convince myself I’m ready for a change … of scenery, and of employment.”

“Perhaps after we talk? We can discuss my offer over lunch, or dinner, perhaps? I’ll look forward to hearing from you … hopefully soon.” With a broad smile, I terminated the call, trusting as I did so that she would call me back in a week, or less.

I checked the progress of my inquiries into Ugrolya Rarfenak’s financials; finding the computer was still searching through the databases, I looked at my search for the person or persons that continued to undercut Omega’s profits by selling illicitly obtained refined eezo.

I was surprised to discover the majority of the credits were still being paid to Eclipse … this was something of which Area T’Loak was already aware, but I guessed she had been unable to locate the reclusive leader of the merc group; I repurposed my search slightly, tasking the program to locate the rock under which Jona Sederis was hiding. Once I had that, I’d have my agent on Omega offer T’Loak a package deal on the information.

What I was doing reminded me of something Liara had shared during our time on the Normandy. Upon taking over the Broker’s position after she and Shepard had killed the beast in his ship orbiting Hagalaz, she had calmly informed the Spectre she had all the secrets of the galaxy at her fingertips, and that she could easily start a war if given ten minutes; I found it somewhat ironic that it was precisely the situation in which I now found myself.

With the distractions of looking for Jona Sederis and the credits being hidden by the batarian Ugrolya Rarfenak, I had sidestepped my major line of inquiry … that of finding some justice for the people considered collateral damage—description courtesy of the Illusive Man—during the pre-war destruction of the turian transport MSV Anixara.

Admiral Owen Fletcher had been the driving force for allowing the ship’s obliteration, even after Griff and I discovered the how and when for its destruction. The unsolved mystery of the vessel’s disappearance without a trace during a transit between two relays had essentially ruined the turian manufacturer, at great cost to local employment.

I chronologically assembled all the conversations Jack Harper had recorded between himself, Admiral Fletcher and assassin-for-hire Michael Moser Lang concerning Harper’s desire to see turian warmonger Raherix Ursivus dead. With the exception of Harper’s conversations with Lang, I had already given most of this information to RaeLee Park.
I was putting *this* information together for Spectre Rachaël Shepard, who would need to have everything I could find if she was going to present evidence of Fletcher’s treachery to the Citadel Council; additionally, she would need to have some idea of what the Systems Alliance would be willing to do in order to make amends for what was essentially a terrorist act by the human race against the turians.

Despite being allies during the Reaper War, Systems Alliance-Turian Hierarchy politics were still quite sensitive … not nearly as raw as turian-krogan relationships, but close; turians had long memories, even all these years after the Relay-314 incident. I really didn’t wish to see us at war with them so soon after the Reapers had been defeated. *Shepard will have to meet privately with Admiral Hackett, after which the admiral will need to meet with the Alliance council. And I absolutely refuse to have General Park suffer any backwash from this mess! … have to make damned sure Shepard knows up front that going after Fletcher is a non-starter if RaeLee gets flamed!*

A low-volume, alternating 'high-low' chime began sounding, indicating one of my searches had completed; taking a look confirmed my hunch that K’ath Din’sari was alive and still working as a waitress at *Krieger’s Tavern* in the Citadel’s Echo ward. *She’s probably still living in the same apartment in the foundations,* came the thought.

After inspecting progress on the other searches, I strolled to our new kitchen to fix myself a bite to eat.

After finishing lunch, I returned to our research center and checked the status of my searches for Jack Harper’s conversations with Fletcher and Lang, along with searching for Ugrolya Rarfenak’s financial records. I loaded the 2185 census of Arcturus Station, the last headcount performed before the Reapers tore through Kite’s Nest the following year. A quick perusal of the alphabetical listing of Alliance service members revealed that *Winters, Kelsey – Lieutenant,* was still working on the station at the time … there was even a footnote telling of multiple visits to the base medical clinic … not surprising, considering the severity of the beating I had given her before my transfer to the shipyard.

I next checked the official transfer logs, where I found Sutton’s name beside a transfer date of 27 August, 2186. *Bastard made it out six weeks or so before the Reapers sliced the station to bits. It’s a bit surprising he didn’t take Kelsey along. Have to wonder if he had inside data … anyway, this all but confirms that Kelsey didn’t get off the station before its destruction.* Discovering Winters’ probable fate made me a bit sad. She had sent mercs to kill me; when they failed, she had attempted to do the job herself. Even with all that, I still don’t feel she deserved to be spaced.

I decided to table my search—at least temporarily—for definitive proof of her fate. With assistance from the Repositories in the Arcturus system, the Alliance fleet had recovered a lot of the bodies and organic remains floating about in the debris field of what had once been a huge orbital platform … and home to approximately 45,000 people, most of them human. The job of identifying all the remains had fallen to those select few possessing the necessary forensics skills; their reports would provide definitive proof of identity for Alliance service members and government workers. Unfortunately, the sheer volume of casualties had them severely backlogged.

I had assembled every last bit of evidence I could gather concerning Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton’s association with Cerberus … an association that began within weeks of Jack Harper’s anonymous 2157 extranet publication of a manifesto warning of the ‘inevitable’ alien attempt to commit human genocide. Sutton was the person in charge of the Cerberus cell inserted
into the population of Arcturus Station in early 2159, before construction concluded in 2162.

Sutton’s crimes continued after his transfer to the Citadel. As a military attaché assigned to the human ambassador’s delegation, his official task was to coordinate Alliance military defense of the Citadel and the Widow System relay; during this time, he continued his clandestine support of Cerberus, especially after the Reapers invaded the galaxy. It was no surprise to discover that Councilor Udina’s well-orchestrated attempt to kidnap or murder the other members of the Citadel Council was actually the result of Commander Sutton’s collusion with the Illusive Man, nor was it a coincidence the Alliance Navy had gradually transferred the entirety of their Citadel patrol fleet out of the system prior to the attempted coup.

Harper had apparently learned just enough from the few files stolen on Mars to deduce the importance of the Citadel—in conjunction with the Prothean weapon—in ultimately stopping the Reaper invasion, so needed as little military interference as possible for his plan to succeed. Too bad he hadn’t counted on the wild-card that was Commander Shepard and her crew on the Normandy.

The miserable bastard had even been involved in the scheme to have humans living on the Citadel move to Sanctuary during the mid-to-latter stages of the war, indirectly helping to keep Henry Lawson supplied with test subjects on which to conduct his twisted experiments.

That Sutton had somehow survived the Reaper’s relocation of the station to Earth orbit late in the war, and its subsequent return to the Widow System by the Repositories, simply spoke to how well he had fortified his offices and residence during his time on the station. *I’ll need to include a warning to Shepard about this. If Sutton has any warning when Shepard comes for him, he may just dig in and resist.*

Having assembled all the irrefutable evidence of Sutton’s crimes, I copied it onto my secure server within Iringù-Eßizkur, then linked in with T’Soni’s secure communications system and transmitted it, along with my warning about Sutton’s fortified residence and offices; I did not want to see a lack of preparedness to allow him to escape capture. It would be up to Spectre Shepard to present the evidence to Admiral Hackett, who would then be responsible for bringing charges against Sutton.

With that task completed, I turned my attention to Admiral Fletcher’s malfeasance, whose most serious crime might prove several orders of difficulty higher for the Alliance to deal with. As another highly placed puppet of the Illusive Man, Admiral Owen Fletcher had been the main proponent of allowing the Cerberus-backed sabotage and destruction of the *MSV Anixara*, the turian-manufactured passenger transport on which Hierarchy war hawk Raherix Ursivus was traveling. Fletcher’s successful push to have Navy brass terminate the Ø7 program afterwards—something he began as soon as he discovered Yuán, Buchanan and myself were working to recover an ancient asari antiquity—was all the motivation I required to see his name and reputation ruined.

Like Sutton, Fletcher had been handsomely paid by Cerberus to keep the Illusive Man advised about Alliance-run programs that might have an adverse effect on activities Cerberus needed them to ignore. After hacking into his personal logs, it was no surprise to discover that Fletcher had managed to alert the entire security force of Cartagena Station to our presence aboard the station, or that he had expected Xiùlán to be permanently crippled from the injuries to her leg.

Immediately after his suicide, General Park had told me he possessed a small fortune, all of it courtesy of Jack Harper and Cerberus. *What the hell? … the thought came and went. These traitors couldn’t survive on their already generous compensation from the Alliance?* Looking further into Fletcher’s Alliance background, I found several notes in the personal files of his immediate superior, the most damning of which was an observation made shortly before Fletcher’s
promotion to the rank of full admiral. “Fletcher has developed a serious gambling problem, to the point of frequently having to borrow funds to cover his debts.” That makes a lot of sense, actually … nothing like a gambling addiction to turn someone into an attractive blackmail target for a miserable bastard like Jack Harper.

Along with the recording I had made when I confronted Kelsey Winters on Arcturus, I believed I now possessed all the proof needed that Admiral Owen Fletcher had allowed credits to bribe him into betraying his oath to the Alliance Navy; payments had been regularly received from Cerberus. The most damning payment of them all was the last one he received before eating a bullet … it was in addition to his regular, end-of-month payments, and three times as large as anything paid in the past. Kelsey Winters had admitted Lang hadn’t received a promised bonus … Fletcher had been the recipient of those credits, for successfully pushing the other admirals to allow the Anixara’s destruction … and the termination of the Ø7 program.

Question is, what the hell do I do with this? The Alliance will have no choice but to reimburse the turian government for the loss of lives on the Anixara; hell, payment of some sort will be due the ship’s manufacturer … their business went in the proverbial sewage pit after the ship disappeared! The only thing that had spared them was the turian military’s pressing need for replacement ships during the Reaper war.

I continued to think about how to present the evidence in such a way that the First Contact War would not be repeated. I also had to ensure General Park wouldn’t suffer any blowback for Fletcher’s push to terminate the Ø7 program.

Guess I need to meet with Spectre Shepard again.

♦ PUBLIC DOCKS, NOS ASTRA · ILLIUM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

It was easy for me to spot Chinami’Taelas nar Jellicoe … she was the only quarian standing among a large number of asari and a lesser number of turians, with a few volus and mechs in the mix. Looking directly at me as I approached, she spoke quietly as I slowed my pace to stop and stand in front of her. “Are you Samantha Traynor?”

“I am.” I couldn’t help but grin … she put me in mind of Tali’Zorah. “And since you are the only quarian I see standing in this area, you must be Chinami’Taelas nar Jellicoe.”

Her faceplate, though tinted a dusky rose, allowed a fairly good view of her eyes and upper face. The skin next to her eyes crinkled slightly … indicative of a smile? She tentatively reached her hand towards me as she replied, “You are quite perceptive, Ms Traynor. There are few people, of any species, that will speak to a quarian when they see one. I am pleased to meet you.”

I took her hand in mine and gently pumped it twice as I replied, “I worked with a quarian, actually. She was right handy with a shotgun, among other weapons … saved my life once right after the war.” I glanced around quickly as I released her hand. “And please, call me Sammy … or Sam. I presume you are free of Synthetic Insights? … and do you have any baggage?”

“Yes to your first question; and no … just what I’m wearing … Sammy.” She looked down momentarily, as if embarrassed. “Synthetic Insights furnished me with three replacement suits during my time here; the cost of each was actually added to my contract.” Shaking her head, she fingered the fabric on her elbows as she said, “This suit is actually past due for replacement.” She paused, then added in an embarrassed tone, “The cost would have added another four months to my contract; I decided to wait until I can rejoin the migrant fleet.”
“Follow me, Chinami. My shuttle is parked nearby.”

Falling into step beside me, she asked in a shy voice, “If you don’t mind, where are you taking me?”

I grinned at her. “Where would you like to go?”

“Seems like forever since I’ve seen my family … the fleet … friends. Is that where you’re taking me … back to the fleet … or Rannoch?”

“If that is your wish. But first I need to make a stop.”

As we approached my shuttle, I sent a command for the port side hatch to open. As it did so, Chinami stopped dead in her tracks. Eyes wide, she stated, “Apologies, Ms Traynor … I was expecting a bigger ship.”

I stood beside the open hatchway and replied, “It’s adequate for my purposes, which is to take you away from this planet. I’m sure you don’t wish to remain here … do you?”

Shaking her head in denial, she continued to speak softly, tearing at my heart with her words. “I have nowhere else to go, Ms Traynor … Sammy. A Synthetic Insights contract only pays for lodging and meals, and a quarian’s dietary requirements are … a bit expensive. By skipping a meal here and there, I managed to save just enough credits to book commercial passage off-world. Unfortunately, the only destination I can afford is Omega.” She giggled, then revealed, “Truthfully, I’d rather sleep in the streets here, not that the authorities would permit me to do so.”

I waved my hand towards the shuttle’s entrance as I spoke softly. “Come on, Chinami. I give you my promise, you will be safe with me.” When she still hesitated, I repeated, “Come on …”

She heaved a big sigh, shrugged her shoulders in imitation of a human’s capitulation, and slowly climbed into the craft. There was a note of surprise in her voice as she saw the containers stacked along the rear of the shortened passenger compartment. “What’s all this?”

“Supplies. Take a seat in the navigator’s chair … we can chat while we head for the relay.”

I followed her inside and closed the hatch as she moved around the partition. Sitting to my right, she appeared to relax slightly as I took the pilot’s seat. I busied myself reactivating the shuttle’s systems, which I’d left ‘hot’ in standby mode in order to facilitate a quick departure. I tasked the onboard VI with applying for flight clearance and a departure vector, than sat back to monitor everything as the eezo core came online; with our mass mostly negated by that core, we were launched upwards by the ventral thrusters, followed by an attitude change as the main engines came to life and powered us towards the sky.

Once we were on our way to a low orbital altitude, I relaxed slightly and looked at my passenger; she, in turn, was watching me with some apparent interest. Her accusation came the instant I focused my attention on her. “You’re not taking me home, are you? What do you want with me, Samantha Traynor?”

“Honestly, I have been asked by my employer to offer you employment … to engage your services. They need you to inspect a computer program that controls the environmental systems on the deep-space station on which we live. The salarian Zus’kann Solban says you are the best computer programmer he’s ever known. We could really use your expertise to check the coding, and expect it will take less than a week—ten days at most—but you will be paid for the entire month.” I jerked my thumb back over my shoulder, saying, “Supplies in the back? Dextro food and
beverages for you … more than enough for three weeks, which is a lot longer than the job is expected to last.”

The eyes behind the face shield narrowed slightly. “What if I decline to assist you? I don’t know you, don’t…”

“You’re certainly free to refuse the offer, Chinami, if that is what you truly wish to do.” I looked straight at her, attempting to win her confidence with brutal honesty. “I’ll stop long enough to refuel … buy us a meal, then we’ll continue on to the Perseus Veil … I understand the geth have been very busy since the end of the Reaper war.”

She redirected her attention to the virtual viewport as she sat back in her seat. After watching the relay we were rapidly approaching for several minutes, she turned back to look at me and asked in a slightly shaky voice, “You’re not planning to dump me on Omega Station, are you?”

With a grin, I replied, “I would not do that to you, Chinami. I don’t even go to Omega myself … at least, not since before the war. Hadn’t planned on going through the nebula, unless you insist on returning to the Veil.” With a quick glance at the virtual image in front of us, I added, “But, I really need you to tell me now, so I can send instructions to the relay. Otherwise, we’re going to make a stop at the Citadel.”

I watched her eyes grow wide behind the tinted face shield. “The Citadel? Why do you need to stop there?”

I responded with a chuckle. “There’s a shop in Echo Ward … a bit obscure, but I believe you’ll enjoy it. It caters to quarians.” She drew back slightly, trying to determine if I was telling the truth. “You told me your envirosuit is nearly worn out. After seeing the patches and wear spots close up, I believe you, so I intend to provide you with a new envirosuit.”

“Who … does that?” She shook her head in apparent disbelief. “What do you really want with me, Sammy?” Her voice now took on a frightened edge. “Are you abducting me? … Is that it?”

I put on my best ‘I’m insulted’ expression as I looked at her. “Chinami, I am not abducting you. You’ve been held in servitude for what? … over three years? My employer learned your contract was completed this morning, and is offering you a real job, paying wages commensurate with your knowledge, experience, and skills. You don’t have to commit to anything, but he would be grateful if you’d agree to inspecting the programs controlling the station’s environmental plant and automated security systems.”

She turned back to study the relay, its image increasing rapidly in apparent size. I took over manual control of the shuttle, slowing our velocity as my companion silently thought about her options. I was just about to prompt her for an answer when she heaved a sigh, turned back towards me and said, “As much as I want to see my family and friends on the Jellicoe, I don’t have anything to show for the time I spent on Illium; I don’t want to return empty-handed, so … I will assist your employer, Samantha Traynor. It will be nice to have some credits to show for my time spent away from the fleet.”

The instant she said I will assist you, I sent the destination request to the relay; it had begun its ponderous dance to reposition itself for a flight to the Imir relay in the Eagle Nebula before she finished speaking. “I appreciate you agreeing to assist, Chinami. I believe you’ll enjoy yourself.”
Placing Plans In Motion

_The Universe doesn’t like secrets. It conspires to reveal the truth, to lead you to it._ — Lisa Unger, _Beautiful Lies_

*Bosh’tet* – a curse, or insult, likely being relative to *son-of-a-bitch* or *bastard* (Khelish)

*Keelah* – By the homeworld (Khelish)

*Mered’vai Rannoch* – Forget Rannoch (Khelish/Source: Mass Effect Wiki)

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

♦ AT LARGE, ECHO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Rather than allowing yet another person to learn of my apartment in Bravo Ward, I parked the Kodiak at a commercial shuttle dock in the middle of Echo Ward; from there, I rented a speeder to take us to the nearby enclave that had been allocated to the quarians by the expanded Galactic Council, something that would never have happened had not the other races—heretofore denied seats on the council—been granted positions, with full voting rights.

The area was an experiment, unique on the entire station, with a number of kinetic-barrier-protected sterile areas maintained by the keepers. It was within one such area I sent Chinami with instructions to buy a nice envirosuit, while I loitered about in a nearby café outside the sterile zone.

Forty-five minutes later, my omnitool activated with a request for credits. Of some surprise, the price for her suit, though expensive, was less than I had anticipated. With a thought, I replied to Chinami as I sent the required amount to the shopkeeper.

I finished my coffee and left the café to walk to the place I had designated for her to meet me. In only a few minutes, I spotted her hurriedly walking towards me; she was carrying a rather large package, which turned out to be her old envirosuit. With a happy note in her voice, she spun about as she stopped in front of me. “How can I ever thank you for this, Sammy? … it’s beautiful!”

I had to admit, she looked very enticing in her new suit; whereas her old one was a bit faded, somewhat threadbare all around and seemed a bit saggy in places, this one fit her like a second skin. She was wearing new knee, shin and foot guards, a new utility belt, and utility pockets wrapped around her upper arms. It even appeared she had a new dagger, strapped around the left side lower leg guard. I admired the elaborate patterns woven into the fabric of her cowl and thigh guards, which did little to cover the muscular definition of those thighs; neither did the tight fabric hide the enticing curves of her bosom, or the cleft between her shapely butt cheeks.

Ever since meeting Yuán Xiùlán on Earth’s moon in 2178, I had never looked at another woman … or female of any species! … with the lust I held for my Inamorata; that said, if Xiùlán had been here to witness my furtive attempts to *not* stare at this female’s sexy bits, she would have literally handed my ass to me as soon as we were by ourselves! On the other hand, if I *had* never met the love of my life … *and* could be assured that having physical relations with this quarian wouldn’t result in her becoming terminally ill, I just may have considered it.

It took me only a few moments to process everything about her new attire. I hoped my voice sounded normal when I told her, “It’s beautiful, Chinami! You look absolutely stunning.”
“You really think so?” She twisted her torso back and forth as she looked down at herself. “It wasn’t even the most expensive suit in the store, but I think it fits me rather well.”

“Agreed!” Very much agreed, dammit! I checked the chrono on my omnitool; nodding to Chinami, I said, “Come on. Let’s get back to the shuttle.”

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Upon breaching the outer edges of the Nebula, I surreptitiously sent a text to Griff instructing him to greet my return with Chinami’Taelas in full Broker mode, so she’d know for whom she’d be working. Our plan for recruiting research assistants to work for us—whether on this station or any other location—involved one or the other of us assuming the role of the bad-ass Broker in order to mask our true identities. It wasn’t perfect by any means, but I hoped to improve on the process as we moved forward.

After we docked, I brought Chinami straight up to the small Deck Zero research lab Griff and I had outfitted specifically for her use.

She had just taken a seat in front of her new terminal when it suddenly sprang to life, causing her to start in surprise with its displayed image of a—being—that could strike fear in the hearts of most. Griff had gotten very good at this masquerade … I almost believed there was some kind of monster speaking to me as I sat beside our guest.

“Agent Traynor. I am pleased to see you successfully retrieved this quarian.”

He then turned his attention to Chinami as he intoned, “Chinami’Taelas nar Jellicoe … welcome to Ahn’Kahar Station. I am the Shadow Broker.”

I could see she was stunned, both by the image on her terminal and by the deeply resonant, electronically modulated voice. “I wasn’t aware … that is …” she took a deep breath, turned to nervously look at me, then returned her gaze to the frightening image on her display panel. “Ms Traynor never told me I would be working for the Shadow Broker … Sir …”

“Does it really matter for whom you are working, Ms Taelas? Ms Traynor is my agent, with full authority to act on my behalf. She has promised you a substantial amount of credits for a short term of employment … employment that is important to the safety of everyone on this station. The work is not illegal, and she will ensure that all your needs are met during the time you are with us.” He paused for several moments, then added, “I believe one of your needs has already been taken care of today, or are you not wearing the new envirosuit she purchased for you on the Citadel?

I placed a hand on her arm above her elbow and squeezed gently. She glanced at me, then boldly answered. “You do not own me, Shadow Broker. Sammy explained that I am free to return to the Migrant Fleet, or Rannoch. If she truly is empowered as your agent, is she authorized to lie to accomplish your goals, or were her words spoken truthfully?”

Griff chortled – the sound coming through as evil incarnate. “Ms Traynor is honest to a fault … just one of many reasons I employ her as my lead agent. If she promised you passage to the Far Rim, then that is what you will receive, Ms Taelas.”

The image turned its dark focus back to me. “Agent Traynor. You are to immediately escort Chinami’Taelas to the hangar bay so you may make good on your promise to transport her back to her people.”
Standing from my chair, I said, “Yes, Sir! … As you wish, Sir.” I touched Chinami’s shoulder, saying, “Please? I have delayed your family reunion long enough.”

The three-fingered hand that grabbed mine was surprisingly strong. “Wait … Mered’vai Rannoch!” She turned her attention back to the image on the monitor. “Sammy said I would have an easy task. I would like to learn exactly why she transported me here from Illium. Just what, exactly, do you need me to do?”

Standing to the left and slightly behind Chinami, I smiled slightly, knowing Griff could see me as he responded, “Agent Traynor is aware of everything I need for you to accomplish during your time on this station, Chinami’Taelas, but … only if you are truly interested in working for me.”

It was apparent the young quarian enjoyed a challenge. “I am … interested, that is. It will be a new experience … actually working for credits … instead of working just to pay off a debt to Synthetic Insights. I will stay here … do what you need me to do.”

“Very good, Ms Taelas.” To me, he said, “See to it, Agent Traynor …” then touched a hidden control, terminating the connection.

Chinami studied me for several long moments before saying, “Keelah! I have never been so frightened in my life! How do you stand working for that bosh’tet?”

I responded quickly. “It’s quite easy, actually. Never, ever, cross him.” I grinned as I retook my seat beside her and said, “Now, here’s what we need you to focus on.”

After spending the early afternoon—with Griff’s assistance—emptying the dextro supplies from the shuttle, then putting everything away in the suite we had reserved for our quarian guest, we briefly discussed setting the area up with isolation barriers so she could feel comfortable during her time on the station. I didn’t wish to waste the time or credits that would be needed to convert the suite to a quarian-safe space if she was only going to spend ten days or so on the station.

Buchanan argued for making the modifications regardless, reasoning that Chinami would be much more inclined to extend her stay if she had an environmentally safe retreat in which to live while not working. In the end, we installed a series of small generators that would form a continuous, gap-free kinetic bubble around the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. I’d let her know what she had available when I escorted her here at the end of her shift.

I returned to our research center just before 1830 to find Chinami still hard at work; she was intently studying a pair of monitors … splitting her attention between them, actually. She turned to greet me as I stopped beside her. “Sammy? What can I do for you?”

“At the moment, you’re doing exactly what you were brought here to do,” I replied with a grin. “Find anything interesting?”

The smile hidden by her mask was obvious in her voice. “Nothing so far, but then, I’m just getting started.”

Replacing my grin with a more serious expression, I said, “Well, you’re done for the evening. I need to introduce you to my partner, then show you to your quarters. Won’t do us any good to have you here if you can’t get a proper night’s sleep.”

Her eyes—barely visible behind her tinted visor—went wide in surprise. “Synthetic Insights never allowed me to stop working so early on Illium. Over time, I became used to never eating dinner until 2030 to 2100 or so. Not a lot of time to sleep either … not that I could rest well. Had to wear
my suit virtually around the clock.”

I shook my head sorrowfully. “You are not going to be treated in that manner here, Chinami. While it is true the Shadow Broker’s reputation throughout the galaxy is that of a ruthless monster, he certainly respects that people, no matter their species or gender, need to be properly rested and nourished in order to perform at peak efficiency. It does not surprise me that Synthetic Insights is unable to even keep its paid employees happy, much less their indentured servants, if they treat them in such a cavalier manner.”

A throaty chuckle was her response. “They treat paid employees much better than they treat their contract people, Sammy.”

“By contract, you’re referring to their indentured workers, correct? … like yourself?”

“That is correct,” she nodded. “We were just one step removed from being slaves.”

“Well, you are not a slave here, Chinami. Lock your terminal. I’ll show you to your suite.”

After electronically locking out her terminal, she rose from her chair and said, “Ready to go.”

I briefly introduced her to Buchanan as we walked to her quarters; in short order we were standing inside her sitting room. I sent the passcode for the entry hatch to her omnitool, then pointed out the emitters placed at intervals at the intersection of bulkheads and ceiling. “Those will generate a kinetic barrier in the form of a rectangular bubble, within which atmosphere scrubbers will purify air that is already quite clean.”

She started to ask, “You mean? … ” to which I responded, “Your food prep area, your bathroom and your bedroom will all be isolated. You can safely remove your suit in there and leave it off as long as the kinetic barrier is in place.”

There was a touch of awe in her voice as she asked, “However did you think of doing this, Samantha?” Her voice seemed to hitch slightly as she added, “Even on the Jellicoe, a luxury such as this is only reserved for officers of the first tier!”

I moved to stand right in front of her. With our faces mere centimeters apart, I grasped her hands as I softly replied, “Edie Coré rigged similar equipment in Commander Shepard’s quarters inside the Normandy. The quarian I mentioned earlier? … the one that saved my life? She was part of Shepard’s crew during her campaign to eliminate the Collectors, and during the latter portion of the Reaper war.” Looking intently at the luminous eyes behind the tinted faceplate, I concluded, “Her name is Tali’Zorah vas Normandy. I consider her my sister-in-arms.”

Eyes wide in astonishment, she whispered, “Tali’Zorah is a legend. Her technical acumen … her abilities … on anything and everything to do with computers and smart circuits, is something I strive to emulate. That you know her … fought beside her?” She shook her head as if in disbelief. “If I may be so bold, why didn’t you recruit Tali for this job?”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Chinami … I believe you are perfect for the task before you. Your recommendation came from a person that believes you to be nearly as proficient as Tali, and we know she is unavailable, as she’s still working on the Normandy. Even if she were available, I would only ask her as a last resort. Tali had her share of run-ins with the Shadow Broker during Commander Shepard’s Cerberus-funded campaign to end the Collectors. The Broker gave me a tremendous amount of latitude to accomplish my tasks, so I made a conscious choice to avoid asking Tali, as I didn’t wish to explain why I was asking her to take this job.”
I stepped away from my guest, saying, “And now, I’m going to leave so you can get comfortable. Get cleaned up, have something to eat … relax for a bit. There’s plenty of dextro-foods and beverages in the kitchen, and there’s a personal terminal in your bedroom that will allow you to look at entertainment programs or galactic news.”

I walked slowly to the main door, then turned. “Just so you know? Should you choose to remain beyond the two weeks or so you’ve agreed to, quarian-style isolation protocols can easily be applied to this entire suite.”

I left her with that thought as I exited the living room. Probably a bit underhanded to tempt her like that. Hell, I’m actually adopting Shadow Broker tactics! Shaking my head slightly, I returned to our private suite to see what Griff had prepared for our dinner.

The next morning, I enjoyed a quiet breakfast with Griff, then strolled into our Deck One research lab, where I paused to watch Chinami’Taelas from across the compartment; after observing her for a few moments, I said, “Good morning. Find any problems yet?”

She studied me for a moment before responding in a happy voice, “The variety of dextro-chirality food you brought for me is amazing! … certainly much more than I expected.” There was a touch of astonishment in her voice. “And not just nutrient paste from Palaven or the Migrant Fleet, either … you brought real food! … from Triginta Petra, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “I take it you found something in your pantry that was good for dinner last night. Maybe even for breakfast this morning?”

Her voice reflected deep gratitude. “I’m really going to enjoy having plenty to eat … and a variety of different foods! … during my stay here. Being able to remove my suit to bathe … to sleep? … all bonuses I could never have anticipated! I never had it this good in Nos Astra!” Her next few words sounded suspicious … accusatory, even. “Keelah! You’re trying to ensure my stay here is so pleasant I won’t wish to leave once I’m done with my task, correct?”

I chuckled as I replied, “I won’t lie to you, Chinami’Taelas. I believe your continued presence here would greatly benefit the Shadow Broker’s work, which is simply the buying and selling of data.” I frowned slightly as I returned to the reason she was here. “Back to my original question. What have you discovered buried in the programming?”

Returning her attention to the monitor in front of her, she replied, “I have minutely inspected 733,184 lines of code, all responsible for controlling the station’s atmosphere processors; I discovered and removed one malicious program embedded within that section.”

I thought about this for a moment before asking, “Did you determine what the program would have done had it been activated?”

“I isolated the program to a secure, stand-alone terminal, but didn’t inspect its instructions. My hypothesis is it would have reversed the normal regeneration of atmosphere … oxygen would slowly be removed, CO2 would have gradually been added, for an effect similar to that which existed when you and Mr Buchanan first boarded the station.” Before I could ask, she added, “It was something that could only be activated remotely, possibly by the Illusive Man himself. I expect it would have been employed to eliminate any researchers or support staff felt to be disloyal to his agenda.”

“I’m glad you caught it, Chinami. It’s possible he suddenly realized what was happening here and activated the purge, after everyone had already left … too late for it to be of any real
consequence.” I thought about the scientists working here during the war and felt a chill run down my spine. “I’m glad you found that bit of malicious code, and I really hope that’s all there is, but … keep looking. When you’re done with the environmental program, I have several other systems we need you to inspect.”

“Of course,” she replied in a happy voice.

Upon my arrival in the research center shared by Griff and myself, I found an orange indicator on my personal terminal flashing for my attention. Taking my seat, I touched the ACCEPT control; to my great surprise, it was a message from Oriana Lawson, asking me to call back with a date and time to meet her for lunch. She added that she would pick a place near her home; given what she had learned about me from her sister, she promised to pick a discrete place in which to meet.

Thinking, *Looks like I’ll be wearing my dress and boots again*, I responded with a text, telling her we could meet tomorrow for lunch, or this evening for dinner. I asked her to send me a note telling me which she preferred, then shifted my attention to a message received from *Normandy*.

Bill Cody needed some assistance with the situation on Sanctum; the coordinates for the residence of Blue Suns leader Caecidia Verinus had been included in the message. Apparently, Master Guns Patton had told her captain of my ability to display a 3-D rendering of a building that graphically and transparently depicted how each level was laid out; she wanted to have that advantage on Sanctum before she went through the front door.

It was the work of only five minutes to find the structure; it looked like every other company-town residence for a number of kilometers around. In addition to rendering the safe-room and its escape route, I notated all the areas where guards were stationed, and the rather large desk used by the Suns’ second-in-command. I couldn’t confirm it, but my gut was screaming at me … it simply had to be a high-explosives trap, exactly like the massive desk inside their Citadel headquarters building. I made sure the warning concerning that piece of furniture was prominently displayed for Cody and Patton to see; I did not wish to learn she had been killed by the damned thing for failure to heed my warning.

I had Buchanan contact Captain Cody while I remained outside camera range. Suspicion was plain in his expression as he said, “Shadow Broker? I wasn’t expecting an immediate response.”

Griff—as the Broker—responded with, “My research agent wishes to personally speak with Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton, Captain. Is she available?”

The suspicious expression deepened slightly before changing to surprise. “I will have her join me here. Will you standby for a few moments?”

“I will wait, Captain,” came the Broker’s calm response.

It literally was only moments before Patton’s image joined that of her captain within the display. She looked at Griff’s shadowed image with a bit of trepidation as he intoned, “Master Guns Patton. Standby.” I was already facing a second camera, seated in front of a different background; the image Cody and Patton would have of me would seem to be originating from an entirely different location, which was being routed through the Broker’s transceiver. I had added an electronic effects filter that would randomly blur and pixelate my image and change the timbre of my voice.

I wanted her to have no doubt it was truly me, so I used her nickname. “Hello, Sandee. It’s been a while.” I continued before she could stammer a reply. “The Broker is sending the data Cap’n
Cody requested, Sandee. I want to ensure you’re aware of all the risks you’ll be exposed to inside that stinkin’ place.” I crossed my arms under my chest and added, “It’s always surprising what people keep in their desks.” I watched with satisfaction as her eyes went wide in recognition of my warning.

With a quick glance at Cody, she addressed me by my nickname as she replied, “Message received and understood, Sammy. I will be sure to study all the data most carefully. Thank you.”

I nodded, then dissolved the feed, allowing Griff’s foreboding image to replace my own. He concluded by saying, “I trust the transmitted data will prove useful. Good day, Captain … and good luck.” He terminated the signal before either person could respond.

I looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You seem to be getting a lot better as a dangerously effective info broker, Griff. I think you’re a natural at this.” I shook my head slightly. “I just hope Sandra Patton takes every precaution when she enters that Blue Suns building; it’d break my heart if she got injured or killed in there for lack of prep.”

Zaeed Massani, after riding up from the miserably freezing cold planet in a UT-47a, walked into the Deck Two conference room aboard Normandy; he greeted Captain Bill Cody, Edie Coré, Lieutenant Commander Steve Cortez and Master Guns Sandra Patton. Saying, “I ’ope you’re closely monitorin’ that miserable Blue Suns ’eadquarters,” as he shook hands all around, then sat down next to Patton; the grin he received from the master gunnery sergeant warmed his heart. Least she smiled at me.

“The Marines we left down there are keeping a close eye on Caecidia Verinus’ residence, Zaeed. Don’t worry … I want to see her captured as much as you.” Touching a control in front of him brought up a three-dimensional, translucent rendering of the building in question. “Shadow Broker sent everything we need, Massani.” Zooming in on a corner of the basement, he continued, “Here’s the area you’re going to be interested in.” Zaeed stood and leaned over the edge of the table to closely study the orange-tinted projection.

“This looks like da renderin’ ov da Sun’s Citadel ’eadquarters what Specialis’ Traynor pulled up fer us while we was inside Iringù-Eßizkur. It’s more detailed than the one I can pull up on my omnitool.” Tilting his head to get a better look, he stabbed a gnarled finger at a large, boxy-looking structure in the middle of the room between the main assembly area and the so-called safe-room. “What’s dis, then?” came the suspicious question. “Is dat a goddamned desk?”

Patton had already studied everything sent by the Broker, especially after receiving Samantha Traynor’s warning. “It is a desk, Zaeed … about the same size as the one I discovered in Delta Ward. Sammy made a point of personally warning me about the damned thing … she cannot confirm it, but believes it’s most likely packed with high-explosives, just like the one that nearly ended our lives on the Citadel.”

Zaeed slowly returned to his chair and sat back in silent contemplation. After a few moments of utter silence in the room, Cody eyed the old merc and asked, “So, how do you want to handle this, Massani? The exit for the escape tunnel is mapped; it comes out right where you predicted.”

Zaeed stared at Patton for another minute before answering. “I’d like ter go in wiv Master Guns, Cap’n, but I really wan’ter grab that turian ’arpy when she tries ter crawl outta ‘er tunnel.”

Cody nodded his understanding as he replied, “It will work out better for all of us if you and a
couple of Marines grab Verinus when she tries to escape. Patton’s been training extensively with
*Normandy*’s Marine squad; I don’t want to disrupt her team’s cohesiveness by permitting an
outsider, no matter how well qualified, to accompany them.”

Massani nodded in agreement. “Understood, Cap’n.” Looking at Patton, he added, “I won’t do
anythin’ ter getcha injured awer killed, Luv. You an’ yer Marines can clean out da roach nest …
I’ll stop da queen when she tries ter run.”

Cody snorted as he gave the old merc a sharp look. “Alive, if you please, Massani. It’d be nice to
place her on trial alongside Santiago and Dal’Serah.” Shaking his head slightly, he added,
“Persuading Verinus and Dal’Serah to give up operational info would be a plus.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, Cap’n … I didn’t kill Santiago, even after carryin’ a grudge for over
twen’y fuckin’ years!”

“Okay then. Let’s get this done.” Focusing on Patton, he said, “Corporal Wilder will accompany
your squad – he’ll be responsible for opening any locked doors that might impede your progress.”
Shifting his attention to Massani, he said, “Zaeed, Corporal Andrews will accompany you and the
other two Marines … he’ll be your hacking expert for Verinus escape route.”

Standing from his chair, Cody picked up his data pads and concluded, “Everyone? … stay safe
down there. It’s colder than Noveria in summertime; the people you’ll be encountering are used to
freezing their asses off. Brutal cold like that will do nothing but slow your reaction times.” With a
nod to Patton, Cody turned and left the conference room.

Patton stood from her chair at the same time as Cody. She grinned at Zaeed, saying, “Back
together again, eh, Massani? Feels like old times.”

The gravelly chuckle she received gladdened her heart, as did his next few words. “I’m glad ter be
workin’ wiv yew again, Luv. I’ve really missed … you … us.”

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**♦ VULPES, SANCTUM · DECORIS SYSTEM, SIGURD’S CRADLE ♦**

Lieutenant Sherri Morse swooped into a designated shuttle landing area less than one-klick away
from the Blue Suns headquarters building; she wanted to get the ungainly blue and white striped
Kodiak on the ground among the rest of the commercial shuttles as quickly as possible. Morse
would stay with the craft until either Patton or Massani signaled for a pickup.

Massani, along with Corporals Andrews and Wilder, exited before the others and began to jog
towards the small warehouse owned by the Blue Suns. Once there, the three men would
reconnoiter the building and the grounds; it had already been determined the small business within
was only staffed with regular employees, most of whom were human. There were no soldiers
inside; if any did appear, it would be because they had accompanied Verinus from within her safe
room.

An electronically camouflaged Corporal Andrews utilized his omnitool to disable the two security
cameras and the passive heat sensor, then employed a backplate mounted pair of eezo assisted
jump-jets to leap over the 5-meter high fence surrounding the rear storage lot. He hid among a
number of shipping crates for several moments to wait out any silent intrusion alarm, then slipped
up to the segmented door at the loading dock.

Rather than override the haptic lock, he whispered to Massani and Wilder over his comms.
“Either of you have a view of this door?” After each had quietly voiced an affirmative response,
he carefully probed the lock … and was happy to discover the programming was simple enough for a child to manipulate. He locked the decryption steps into his omnitool while transmitting the small program to Massani’s and Wilder’s omnitools, saying, “All that’s necessary to unlock this door is to point your omni at the interface and pull the trigger … so to speak.”

Corporal Wilder whispered, “Same code for all the doors?”

“Hard to believe, ain’t it?” Andrews breathed in return.

Massani weighed in. “Security is pret’y lax around ’ere … Suns ’as ’ad things too goddamned good, fer too damn long, I think.”

Task complete, Andrews carefully left the loading dock and retraced his steps to the stack of shipping crates, where he decloaked after spotting Massani, hunkered down among several large containers. “Where’s Wilder?”

“Cloaked … checking the fence line for security personnel,” came the whispered response.

Nodding his head, Andrews sent word to Patton, telling her she was clear to proceed.

Patton gave a nod to Navy CPO Jae Stephens; while waiting for confirmation from Massani, the specialist had utilized his own intrusion skills to hack into the Blue Suns’ offsite servers. He had created an override for the surveillance program responsible for controlling the several cameras and passive motion detectors monitoring the perimeter. The tricky part of his task involved looping the camera feeds for the previous 30-to-40 minutes.

The Master Gunnery Sergeant had given him the mission report from her own mission on the Citadel; after studying Traynor’s intrusion tactics, he quickly realized that duplicating her actions here would be several orders more difficult. On the perpetually climate-controlled Citadel, Traynor hadn’t had to contend with the variable light and intermittent precipitation from a natural environment. Thanks to a 69-hour long day, Stephens didn’t have to worry about the apparent motion of the planet’s sun; it was the intermittent, wind-whipped cloud cover that caused the problem.

The specialist compensated for this by adding a randomizing instruction to the small program he’d generated to override the cameras; the recorded video from the multiple cameras would be repeated using random starting points, thus avoiding the appearance of being repeated – at least, that was the expectation. While the recording would be looped, the time display in the upper right corner of the frame would continue to increment normally.

With a whispered “Good to go, Master Guns,” he activated the surveillance hack, then quickly overrode the haptic lock guarding the perimeter fence entry gate; this allowed a pair of cloaked Marines to quickly shove the gate open and move through the gap. After dispatching the surprised and thoroughly overmatched gatehouse guards, they were joined by the rest of the squad, which quickly fanned out in order to intercept and eliminate the rest of the turian guards prowling the open areas between the fence and house. After observing the casual manner in which the turians went about their job, Patton almost felt sorry for Verinus’ guards … all of them would be dead before they could even realize they were being assaulted.

Eight minutes after entering the property through the main gate, Patton’s squad of Marines gathered at the northwest corner of the house. Patton looked at Sergeant Sorsby and Corporal Menae. “You two get up to the window above us. Once inside, you’ll be the distraction we need to go in the front.” She looked each of the Marines in the eye. “Remember, no quarter … we’re not interested in taking prisoners, and don’t let any of them get behind you.” Holding up her
chrono, she made ready to start a countdown timer. “You have 90 seconds, beginning … now.”

Sorsby and Menae nodded in unison as they stood, activated their cloaks once more and silently scaled the wall, their ascents aided by mass effect generators attached to each of their backplates. Patton and the rest of her team quietly moved to the main entry door. Sandee really wished there was a rear entrance, but—with the exception of the emergency bolt hole—this particular house had been purpose built with only the one way in or out.

As her countdown timer reached 10-seconds, Patton nodded to Specialist Stephens. “Do it.” He responded by initiating the hack to unlock the door; as the haptic latch control cross-faded from red to orange to green, the muffled sounds of gunfire could be heard from somewhere inside the building. “Let’s go, people … weapons free.” She pushed the door open and went through in a crouch, followed by the other four members of her squad.

A batarian and a pair of turians, assault weapons in their hands, spun around at the sound of booted feet on the polished floor; Patton felt they had been about to join in the fight upstairs. As a body came crashing down the stairs, a round fired from Patton’s N7 Crusader took the batarian’s head off his torso and spun him around to collapse on the floor. The staccato double-bark of a pair of N7 Valkyries above and behind her painted the far walls and shiny floor in spatters of blue; the turians providing the pigment had instantly ceased to care about anything in life as they died.

Patton rose from her crouch; stepping over the batarian, she motioned for Gunny Mercer to move to the lower level; he followed Corporal Brandsrud and Staff Sergeant Yearego as they carefully eased themselves down the stairs. They employed modified, Cerberus-style polycrystalline-composite shields held low in front of them to deflect the stream of bullets being fired up at them, and had swapped out their Valkyries for M-6 Carnifex hand cannons.

Their arrival was met with scattered gunfire from a number of Blue Suns soldiers stationed in the large meeting room. With bullets pinging their shields and armor, the three men double-timed it the rest of the way down the stairs and spread out; once off the stairs, the Marines crouched behind their hand-held shields and carefully whittled away the defenders. Patton, accompanied by Sorsby, Menae and Stephens, came down the stairs with their Valkyries firing so fast the four guns together sounded like a single, slightly syncopated Gatling gun.

The Navy Specialist and six Marines made short work of the defenders; after going around the room to insure none of the Blue Suns were going to get up again, the team gathered at the foot of the stairs, where Patton called Massani on comms. “Zaeed, we’re in the basement. Look for Caecidia Verinus to come out of that building any time now.”

“We just got ’er, Luv. She opened da ’idden door ov ’er concealed tunnel, spotted us waitin’ fer ’er an’ charged us wiv biotic warps an’ a fuckin’ N7 Piranha! Corporal Wilder took a round in da shoulder … didn’t leave me ’n’ Andrews any choice. Took down ’er barriers and killed da bitch, Master Guns. Won’t be any trouble ter anyone ever again.”

“Damn, Zaeed! I suppose it was too much to expect that a former turian cabal member would simply give up. Wilder gonna be okay?”

“Andrews ’as da bleedin’ under control, but ’e needs ter be on da Normandy soon as possible!”

Lieutenant Sherri Morse, having monitored all comms since the team’s deployment, came on the channel. “I’m already on the move, Massani. Be there in less than a minute.”

Patton responded with, “Wilder only, Lieutenant. Massani and Andrews need to inspect our dead turian, then go back through her tunnel.” Directing her instructions to Massani, she added, “Make
sure you thoroughly search her body, guys – strip her if you have to! ... and as much as I hate having to even suggest this, I don’t believe a cavity search would be out of line.” After a pause to think about what she’d just said, Patton added, “She might be dead, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t have some nasty, possibly lethal surprises hidden on, or inside her person. Shields and barriers up before you begin your scans, Andrews. Massani, you stand back while Andrews searches her!”

“You got it, Master Guns.”

♦ SSV NORMANDY, SANCTUM · DECORIS SYSTEM, SIGURD’S CRADLE ♦

Zaeed Massani was tired … every muscle was sore, his bones even hurt. He sat—flopped, actually—rather heavily in the chair closest to the conference room’s sliding entry door. He wasn’t looking forward to the de-brief, especially since Corporal Andrews was in the ship’s Medbay on Deck Three with a serious shotgun wound. Considering he, Andrews and Wilder had been facing a biotic turian with a seriously bad attitude, he felt fortunate that she had been the one needing a stasis chamber for the ride back to the Citadel.

Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton came in, walked around the table and took a seat across from Massani. She was sure her attempt at a smile came across as a grimace as she quietly said, “Wasn’t your fault, Zaeed. She sealed her fate the instant she launched biotics and fired a shotgun at the three of you.”

Massani dry-scrubbed his face with both hands for a moment before casting his one-eyed gaze at Patton. “Zat supposed ter make me feel be’er, Sandee? … because it don’t. I really wan’ed a chance ter talk ter ’er … learn what I could about their operashuns out ’ere.”

Cody quietly entered and took the chair at the end. “Final tally, in addition to Caecidia Verinus, is ten humans, eight turians and nine batarians.” He glanced at a datapad before continuing. “Being forewarned about heavy furniture packed with HE allowed us to have Specialist Stephens erect a barrier around that desk Traynor told us of; he safely disarmed the damned thing, without blowing himself, the team or the entire house to hell.”

“So, what’s next, Sir.” Patton glanced nervously at Zaeed as she queried, “Return to the Citadel?”

Shaking his head, Cody replied, “We’ll stay in the system for a few days while we go over the data we downloaded from their servers … see what we can find. I don’t want the Suns to simply send in replacements. I would like to discover who their next leader is going to be, and from where they will be leading.” He looked at the pair as he concluded, “Good job, Master Guns … Massani; I believe the Blue Suns are well and truly done on Sanctum.”

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

“I don’t like it, Sammy.” Griff quietly expressed his concern for my safety as we enjoyed a quiet dinner; I had requested that Chinami sit with us, even though she could not eat our food. “What happens when you run into trouble?”

“I had dinner with General Park and retrieved Chinami while you stayed here, Griff. What possible trouble could I get into while meeting with the general and Spectre Shepard?”

“Seriously?” The raised eyebrow and snarky expression spoke volumes. “Trouble always finds you, Sammy. You’re a damned organic trouble-magnet!”
I continued to eat as he finished his beer; he was objecting to my proposed consultation afterwards with a representative of the turian government. “I’ll be fine, Griff. I don’t anticipate being gone for more than a day … two, at the most.”

“I seriously doubt you’ll run into any trouble during your stay on Thessia, Sammy … it’s your possible trip to Palaven that has me concerned,” he responded. “The planet was decimated by the Reapers, every bit as bad as Earth, and the reports I’ve read suggest their military is not completely in control of things.”

Chinami, having remained silent to this point, spoke up. “Sammy, I feel I must agree with Mr Buchanan regarding your proposed trip. This is not the type of activity in which a top agent for the Shadow Broker should be actively involved; it would be prudent instead to have an envoy represent you.”

With a small chuckle, she pushed back from the table and stood. “If you will excuse me, I’m going to my quarters. I want to relax a bit before I go to bed; being able to do so without having to wear my suit is like a dream. Good night.”

As she left our dining area, I finished my own beer and looked at Griff; after thinking about their comments for several minutes, I finally said, “The meeting with Shepard and General Park is still a few days away. I’ll be flying to Eden Prime tomorrow so I can meet and have lunch with a potential accountant.”

Buchanan looked at me in surprise. After a quick glance to make sure Chinami had truly left for her quarters, he asked, “An accountant? Do we really need someone to keep our books, Sammy?”

I chuckled. “Griff, I nearly fell over when Liara revealed the true amount of the resources the Shadow Broker possesses … even after she deducted what she brought to the organization when she left her position on Illium, and after taking into account the losses sustained by the brokerage during the war, the amount of credits alone is staggering.” I shook my head, still not quite believing the information myself.

Griff’s next few words were nearly belligerent. “Dammit, Sammy. Why keep this a secret? Why not share this with me?”

“I just learned about it myself, but …” With a thought, I had my omnitool send a current balance to his, then watched his mouth fall open in awestruck wonder as he looked at the bottom line. “That’s why, Griff.” I added, “In addition to the creds, there are numerous properties, a dozen or so businesses—some legitimate, some not so—there’s even a retired asari patrol craft, the Rebekah, sitting in storage on Illium. It was a fully functional warship, smaller than one of their corvettes … not much bigger than one of their modern shuttlecraft, actually … unfortunately, it’s twenty-five years out of date.”

Griff had perked up at my mention of a proper ship. “Was, you say? What functions would it no longer possess, Sammy? What are the crew requirements? It would certainly be faster for getting around between the relays than using the Kodiak.” Griff sounded almost as eager as a kid the day before Christmas. “Can we take a look?”

I added a smile to my reply. “We can take a look … and should be able to utilize it, as long as its anonymity can be maintained. The instant it could be tied to the Broker, it would cease to be useful to us, so its registration would have to be kept separate from the Shadow Broker. As for crew, modern upgrades would enable it to be flown by one person with VI assistance, same as Spirit’s Rage before the war … except now, there’s been twenty-five years of improvements in virtual intelligence interfaces. Either of us could use our omnitools to control it! We’d have speed
of thought actions and reactions.”

Buchanan leaned back in his chair. “So, where can we take this vessel to have the controls upgraded and modified?”

“Asari craft … asari shipyard,” I said quietly. “Liara T’Soni will know where we should take it for service work and upgrades.”

Buchanan leaned back in his chair. “I’ll call Spectre Shepard for a recommendation first thing.”
Meetings Adversarial and Enjoyable

She has been feeling it for a while now, that sense of awakening. There is a gentle rage simmering inside her, and it is getting stronger by the day. She will hold it close to her – she will nurture it and let it grow. She won’t let anyone take it away from her. It is her rocket fuel and finally, she is going places. She can feel it down to her very core – this is her time. She will not only climb mountains – she will move them too. — Lang Leav, The Universe of Us

Ai – [愛 - love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)

Foundations – The ‘undersides’ of the Citadel Wards, between the inhabited superstructures and outer hull.

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’

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

Qíngfū – [情夫 – lover]

♦ CONSTANT, EDEN PRIME · UTOPIA, EXODUS CLUSTER ♦

The elapsed time for my trip from the Horse Head Nebula had been rather short, as I didn’t have to travel to another system once in the cluster, and Eden Prime was at the point in its orbit that took it rather close to the Exodus Cluster relay. As soon as I was on the ground at the private spaceport, I sent a message to Oriana Lawson; her response was the name and location of a restaurant where we could meet and have a quiet lunch.

The Fiery Margay Restaurant & Bar was located near the spaceport, so was only a short ride away in a rented speeder. I noticed a number of heads turn towards me as I strode in the front door like I owned the place; most quickly turned back to their meals. I looked around carefully but could see no sign of Oriana. I gave my name to the hostess, who nodded and asked me to follow her; she led me into a seemingly darker corner of the dimly lit dining area, and finally stopped at a booth that was already occupied.

A beautiful young woman looked up at me and, smiling as I carefully slid in behind the table, extended her hand and said, “Samantha Traynor? Oriana Lawson. Pleasure to finally meet you. Miranda told me you were a real looker, but I had no idea!”

I hoped the dark color of my skin hid the blush I could feel painting my cheeks. “She said that? Well, it’s nice to finally be able to put a face with the name … do you mind if I call you Ori?”

A moment’s uncertainty was followed by a small nod as she replied, “If that is your wish.”

I grinned as I continued, “Thank you … and I’m Sammy, or Sam … take your pick.” After a split-second pause, I said, “I must admit, you are almost a spitting image of your sister.” At the slight frown I received, I added, “That’s not a bad thing, Ori … just a statement of fact. And is it true that you refer to your sister as ‘Randa’ when you’re upset?”

Even in the dim light, I could see her blush. Shaking her head slightly as if in denial, she asked, “How did you learn my personal nickname for her? It’s true, I’ve had very little exposure to
normal, everyday interactions with people, even when I was in school.”

With a small sigh, she continued, “Miranda was always checking on me, trying to make sure anyone I met … well, boys that I met … were kept at arm’s length until they got to know me better. She tried so bloody hard to keep me from experiencing any disappointment or heartache.”

“Is that why she sequestered you away, out here on Eden Prime? No big city life to tempt you?”

Ori actually giggled at that … I found it to be a musical sound. “She wanted to keep me unspoiled by the unsavorness of the galaxy, I guess. All she really wanted was for me to have a normal life … maybe get married, raise some children. It is really, really difficult to get into any real trouble with my big sister always watching over me.”

I chuckled at her seeming naiveté. “No explanation needed, Oriana. Miranda can be somewhat intimidating.” I smiled wickedly as I added, “Next time you speak with her, ask her how her relationship with Major Alenko is going. I’d almost bet you’d get a big ol’ ‘No comment!’.”

Her eyes grew wide in surprise. “She’s actually involved with someone? That’s … surprising.”

A waiter approached our table to ask if we had made our luncheon selections. I told Ori to order for me; she nodded, looked at the waiter and said, “We’ll each have a garden salad, followed by two Blackened Whitefish Ruebens.”

She glanced back at me, a question plain in her expression, then smiled when I looked at the waiter and added, “Bring a couple of your signature pale wheat beers … I haven’t been here since before the war, so I’m really interested in how well your local breweries are recovering.”

The waiter nodded wordlessly, turned and left. Ori said, “I wasn’t sure if you wanted a beer, Sammy, and I seldom imbibe, so this will be a learning experience for me as well.” The violet-blue eyes studied me for several moments before she quietly asked, “So, you want me to come to work for you … as an accountant. You never mentioned what it is you do for a living …” her voice trailed off to uncertain silence.

“I have partnered with a gentleman—a long-time friend from before the geth landed on the planet—as a data broker, Ori. We’ve achieved a modest amount of success, enough so that we’ve begun expanding our operations a bit. Thing is, it’s an isolated existence. For some, finding and selling data is an exciting, highly visible profession, Ori, but that’s not how we choose to operate; my partner and I work from a formerly abandoned research station in the Horsehead Nebula.”

Our salads and beers arrived; I took a sip from the frosty mug and sighed in satisfaction. “That is an extremely fine ale.” It had been a while since breakfast for me, so I took several bites from the leafy greens in front of me, then followed with another swallow of beer.

Ori looked at me with a great deal more interest. “Sounds as if you lead a life even more isolated than the one my sister designed for me.” She took a swallow from her own glass, then added, “Not so sure I’d be able to maintain my sanity on an isolated station, Sammy. I enjoy having people around me, and I like being able to take a walk across a grassy, dew-moistened field when the urge strikes. A space station? That’s a pretty sterile existence, isn’t it?”

I had nearly finished my salad when the waiter reappeared with our sandwiches. His offer to bring a refill of our beverages was met with an enthusiastic ‘Yes, please!’ from both of us. I took a bite of my sandwich as he departed, chewing while I thought of the dilemma presented to me by Oriana’s stated reluctance at working on an isolated station in the middle of nowhere. A thought struck me as I sat there thinking, but I would need to speak with Cordell Webb upon my return.
My silence must have made her uncomfortable; she regained my attention by nudging my foot under the table. With a small sigh, she said, “Look, Sammy. I don’t want to simply refuse any legitimate offer that’s presented to me … it’s just … I don’t know if I can work on a space station for an extended period of time. It’d be a completely new experience for me.”

One of the advantages of my new omnitool was it was mostly hands-free; I didn’t have to wipe the tartar sauce from my fingers in order to activate it. I transferred a list of the job requirements and potential salary to her omnitool as I continued to enjoy my sandwich; her surprise was reflected in her eyes and voice as she asked, “Do I even want to know how you did that?”

I took a long pull from my mug, then smiled as I replied, “I don’t expect an immediate answer from you, Ori … study my offer … talk to Miranda, or your friends here. I believe you would be a real asset to our operation, but you have to want a change in your life, and this would be a big one … and I can assure you my partner and I will make every effort to ensure your stay is as comfortable as possible.”

Oriana had a smile that could light up a room on a dark day; she used it here as she finished first her sandwich, then her beer, before answering, “I will study your offer, Sammy. If I feel that making a move off world will be right for me, I’ll let you know … give me a few days?”

♦

AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

After inspecting the progress of the various search programs running on the main server, I had enjoyed an early breakfast with Buchanan while he updated me on the progress being made in the station’s remodeling; we were both looking forward to the completion of all the construction taking place in various locations on this deck, as well as the five decks below us.

It was a thrill for me to once again have a dedicated space for my physical exercises; I had been exercising beside my bed ever since my transfer from England to Vancouver before the war. Being able to pummel a heavy bag as part of my morning routine made me realize how much I had missed it, and just how horribly out of practice I had become. My technique and timing had deteriorated to the point that Xiülán could have handily kicked my ass without working up a sweat; my sense of physical well-being improved immeasurably once I was able to perform my entire routine, particularly in a higher gravity environment.

After dialing the gravity back to station-normal, I returned to my quarters, there to shower and get dressed for the day. After breakfast, I needed to speak with Chinami concerning her inspection of the station’s environmental programming, before speaking to Cordell Webb concerning another addition I wanted to install; afterwards, I planned to contact Jipaw Zilorno concerning Aria T’Loak.

I was going to have the salarian offer the queen of Omega all the information I had accumulated concerning the illegal sales of refined Eezo, and the location of the major beneficiary of those sales, Jona Sederis. At the same time, he would offer to sell her all the financial records concerning an unpaid transaction fee for the illegal sale of an asari artifact before the war.

If she refused to pay for that data, or the information concerning Sederis, my agent would politely inform her the offer would be made to the Eclipse; one way or the other, the Shadow Broker would be reimbursed from all the time invested in tracking down that information!

There was no doubt in my mind Jipaw Zilorno was in for an interesting morning.

Within several hours of transmitting the information to Jipaw Zilorno, the chime indicating an
incoming call from our Omega agent trilled beneath the console; as I was still ‘in costume’ from my earlier conversation with him, I touched the ACCEPT control and answered with a snarling growl. “Report!”

An extremely nervous salarian came into focus, saying, “Please forgive this intrusion, Shadow Broker. The client, Aria T’Loak, wishes to speak with you in person.” Jipaw Zilorno looked as if he wanted to disappear through the floor. “You have my sincere apologies, Shadow Broker … all my attempts to keep you out of this transaction have failed … miserably so.”

Even though he couldn’t see my face, I smirked at his image. “Make the connection, Zilorno! After I’m done dealing with the queen, I expect she’ll be more than happy to receive information from you in the future!” The salarian’s image cross-faded into the scowling visage of Aria T’Loak. I wondered, Is everyone on that freakin’ rock perpetually unhappy?

Even though she was scowling, I guessed her aggravation was actually meant for Zilorno, who had been the unfortunate bearer of how much the information was going to cost her. “Shadow Broker! … do you consider yourself too fucking good to speak with me?”

“The information retrieved for you did not require me to personally deliver it. My time is too valuable to spend in dealing with clients, no matter how important they may think they are.” I paused for a beat. When she didn’t interrupt, I continued, “The data collected for you covers two entirely different subjects; the common denominator is credits … a lot of credits.” A careful observation of her eyes and mouth revealed that, even with her lips pressed together in a hard, straight line, her eyes widened slightly at the word ‘credits’. It was the key motivator in her life.

With a furtive glance to her right, she purred, “All right … what information do you have for me?”

I chuckled. “In case Zilorno did not tell you, or you have conveniently forgotten, credits come first, T’Loak.” I gave her the same mid-six figures number I had told Zilorno to relay to her, adding, “The amount is for both items, the first of which should prove to be most important for you. We can discuss your purchases as soon as I confirm receipt of the credits, the sum of which is non-negotiable.”

“I don’t purchase anything sight unseen,” she grumbled. “How do I know you’re not attempting to shake me down?”

“Shake you? … Shake you down? …” I spoke with as much outraged indignation as I could muster. “Have you somehow forgotten to whom you are speaking!? The Shadow Broker is not some sleazy, cheap-assed information farmer you can intimidate with your scowling blue face! What I am offering is worth every credit I am demanding! So now …” I paused to let my statement sink in, “… I find myself thinking I need to add a penalty, for your acerbic attitude and to compensate me for the personal time you are costing me … say, five percent?” As an afterthought, I coldly added, “Or, I can simply offer the entire package to the Eclipse.”

Her face went dark at that last comment. “I don’t give a flying fuck who the hell you are! I demand to be treated with …”

“SILENCE!” I was not about to let this arrogant bitch dictate the direction of this conversation. “How dare you speak to the Shadow Broker as if he was some minion held captive under your blue thumb!” I ground out in a menacing tone. “I existed long before you were shitting green! … I will exist long after you are nothing more than fish food in the Kendra Ocean! How I treat you is entirely based on a level of mutual respect … of which I sense none!”

I took a great deal of satisfaction at seeing her mouth open and close several times, as if she were
the aforementioned fish, suddenly plopped onto dry land. When she finally found her tongue once more, she seemed to be just a bit less confrontational. “I would at least like to know the topics for which I am paying an exorbitant sum of credits.”

“Fair enough. The location of Jona Sederis, and an unpaid transaction fee from before the war.”

“You discovered where that psychopathic ardat is hiding?”

“I have … and it is obvious that you have not.” With an evil chuckle I added, “I also have confirmation of the inordinate amount of pleasure she continues to enjoy from undercutting your prices for refined Eezo.”

“Why didn’t the salarian tell me this in the beginning? For that matter, he could have simply passed the information to Bray,” she hissed in barely controlled rage. “He would have brought it to my attention immediately, and we may have been able to avoid all this unpleasantness.”

I chuckled again … this was actually fun. “Were our positions reversed, would you be willing to treat with an underling … a nobody?”

I could see Aria had calmed down a bit, even if the scowl was still firmly in place. “I don’t believe I would be so inclined.” She was staring at my image—light years away on Omega—as if I was actually standing in front of her. If she hoped to be able to identify the person concealed by the backlighting, deep hood and shadows, she was going to be disappointed.

She sighed unhappily as she looked down and entered the codes needed to transfer the credits from her account; these would be received in a blind, VI controlled account; the VI would instantly transfer them to another, similarly blind account while eliminating the first account. This process would repeat through no less than a dozen different accounts—located in as many systems—in order to prevent anyone from back-tracing the transfers.

When the final transfer was confirmed, I said, “Very good, Aria. The data is being transmitted to your secure server. I believe you will have no trouble extricating Jona Sederis from the hole within which she is residing.” I chuckled softly as I added, “What will become of Eclipse without their leader, I wonder. Ahh … perhaps they will unite behind a new leader? One based on Omega, perchance?”

“Perhaps,” came the snarky rejoinder. “But you said there were two items up for discussion. What is this unpaid transaction fee you are referring to?”

“In 2180, an exceedingly rare and ancient artifact from the asari age of exploration changed hands in a lower sector of Omega … your station. A batarian brokered a deal between the Blue Suns and a pirate … a rather valuable piece from what I’ve heard, and no one ever bothered to pay your transaction fee.” I watched glittering violet-blue eyes narrow to dangerous slits as I added, “The fine details of said transaction are contained within the files I am sending you. The batarian still resides on Omega Station; find him, and you should have no trouble recovering a generous percentage of the credits you just transferred to the Shadow Broker.”

“He’s a fucking batarian … what makes you think he still has two creds to rub together?”

“Because he was afraid for his life. The artifact was stolen back and final delivery to a private collector was never completed. So, in order to avoid drawing unwelcome attention and ending up dead, he adopted a low-key lifestyle; he has not been living large during the intervening years, thus still possesses most of the creds he was paid for brokering a deal that cost the Blue Suns 65-million credits.”
I could visualize the wheels spinning behind Aria’s eyes. She finally nodded once in grudging appreciation. “You have my thanks for this information … Shadow Broker. I must admit … I harbored serious doubts concerning your continued existence … your survival during the war. Your attention during that time must have been focused on ending the Reaper threat. It’s good to know there is at least one other constant in this galaxy.” With that, she terminated the connection, leaving me to relax for the first time since being contacted by Jipaw Zilorno.

While I was entertaining—and being entertained by—Aria T’Loak, Griff had contacted Spectre Shepard on Thessia in order to inquire about spaceship modifications and repairs … specifically, where to take a retired, 25-year old asari patrol craft to have it modified and modernized with the latest nav-aids and crew amenities.

She had unhesitatingly suggested he contact T’Sere Shipwrights, on the eastern coast of Dassus; Shepard promised to immediately contact the operations director, Matriarch Tralis, in order to provide an introduction. After telling Griff that T’Sere had most likely been the ship’s manufacturer, the Spectre assured Buchanan that T’Sere could be trusted for their efficiency and quality workmanship, as well as their complete discretion.

After speaking with Shepard, Griff had waited twenty minutes before contacting the Matriarch, who proved to be extremely gracious and most accommodating. All she required to begin the process was a down payment, along with enough credits to pay for the ship’s accumulated dock and storage fees on Illium; she would then send a flight crew to the ship’s location in Nos Astra. Once the Rebekah was released from the docks, they would tow or fly the vessel to the T’Sere shipyard on Thessia. She promised to contact Griff with an estimated cost for the needed repairs and upgrades as soon as she was able to complete a thorough inspection of the vessel.

Griff smiled as he told me, “Interestingly enough, the ship’s name is a Thessian word for guardian or protector. Matriarch Tralis told me ‘Rebekah’ literally means ‘watcher of the night’, and that this ship might well have been the class leader for its type of patrol craft.” With a smirk, he added, “She’ll inform me after she’s had a chance to perform a detailed inspection.”

“That’s interesting,” I grinned in reply. “Leave it to the Shadow Broker to obtain the lead vessel of its type as soon as it was retired from military service.” Thinking about having a craft more capable than a Kodiak led me to thoughts about our own Rebekah, Iringù-Eßizkur. “I need to have another conversation with Irin.”

Buchanan’s happy expression clouded slightly as he asked, “What about?”

“Having seen the appearance of the station with her being docked above us made me realize she’ll always be an inescapable indicator of the Shadow Broker’s presence on this station, just like she was on the Citadel. I realize she’s a ‘cold’ structure, but visually? … If she’s docked, then it stands to reason we must be on board here as well.”

—I have given the matter some thought since our previous discussion, Friend-Samantha. Her voice, suddenly sounding from a close-by terminal, startled me. With a small laugh, I responded, “Of course you have, Irin.” I coughed into my fist and asked, “Have you come to a conclusion?”

—I can stand off from the station far enough to prevent easy detection of my form, while still being close enough to provide prompt assistance or nearly immediate transportation when needed.

“That would be wonderful, Irin. I hate the necessity of having you out there, just idling. If the hangar access and interior were larger, it’d be an ideal place for you.”
I understand. I will take up a position that will enable me to observe the normal approach corridors for other vessels. In that way I can become an early warning beacon, yet still remain close enough that my deep-space comms ability will remain useful to you and Buchanan-Griffen.

I nodded, even though my large friend could not see me. “Sounds perfect, Irin, but … remain as you are for just a while longer, okay?” I paused as I stood from my chair and moved to inspect the readouts of our various inquiries. “Until we have the Rebekah in our possession … and probably afterwards … we’ll still need to rely on you for interstellar transport, just as we always have.”

I will do as you request, Shadow Broker.

I instantly tensed up and just as quickly relaxed the instant a rather large pair of hands gripped my shoulders. “What are you going to do now that you have Aria on the warpath looking for Jona Sederis and Ugrolya Rarfenak?”

I tipped my head up and back to look into a pair of caring, greenish-gray eyes. “I need to contact Xiûlán, see if she can get off the Hong Kong long enough to meet with someone … a batarian female, living hand-to-mouth down in the foundations of Echo Ward on the Citadel. I intend for her to have a portion of the credits that I took from Aria for the information on Rarfenak.”

“I kind of remember hearing about her … during the search for that stolen asari figurine bought by the Blue Suns. Didn’t she broker that deal?”

“She didn’t actually broker the deal … just put Rarfenak in a position to do so, for which he promised her some creds for her trouble. Instead, she nearly got her throat sliced open by a big-assed turian … a turian I later left dead in her apartment, after she’d been spirited off Omega.”

Buchanan chuckled. “Sounds like a payment that is a long time overdue, Sammy.”

“There’s more truth to that statement than you know, Griff. This female went to Jipaw Zilorno for assistance.” His eyes widened in surprise as I continued, “Yep, our agent on Omega. My search for that figurine actually led me to meet with him in his office.” With a chuckle at the memory, I added, “I had to walk over a damned mountain of a useless krogan bodyguard to get in to see ’im.”

Griff barked a short laugh. “And now Zilorno is working for us! How ironic is that?”

I nodded my head in agreement. “Funny how things turn out sometimes.” I activated the comms terminal, tasking it to connect with Xiûlán’s personal device on the Hong Kong as I wondered if she was ready to drink some uncut batarian ale.

-An extremely tall woman sauntered through the door into Krieger’s Tavern; ignoring the many curious looks from patrons nursing beverages at the long, polished bar, as well as the unfriendly looks from the batarian owner who was pouring drinks—and seemed to recognize her from her previous visit in 2182—she continued past them all to sit at a table in a quiet corner of the room.

The batarian waitress sized her up as she approached. Dark leather duster, a deep cowl pulled over her head keeping her face obscured in shadow, a hint of dull black armor on her lower legs, and the handle of a straight blade knife protruding from a sheath strapped to her boot and shin guard. Stopping across the table from this human, the batarian felt the stirrings of a memory from before the war … before the appearance of Sovereign. With a start, the waitress formerly known as K’ath Din’sari realized she knew this woman. “Yuán,” she stammered. “Is that correct?”
A low chuckle preceded a lightly accented voice. “You have a good memory, Fonya Dhaggerr … did I pronounce that correctly?” The woman tilted her head slightly to the left as she set a couple of creds on the table and said, “Tonight, I’ll just have a whisky, neat.”

Fonya wordlessly slid the credits off the table, went to the bar, poured the requested beverage in a tumbler and returned. A black-gloved hand came out to pick up the glass and take a sip. She clamped her lower lip with her teeth as she sucked air through them and asked, “What time do you get off work?”

Fonya took a quick look at her chrono. “Fifteen minutes. I don’t have to help close up tonight, but I do need a bite to eat before I leave.” She heaved a tired sigh, saying, “Been a long day.”

“You eating here?”

Fonya nodded her head. “Food’s not the best, but it’s filling, and it’s included in my comp.”

Xiùlán leaned over the table a bit so she could be heard over the low buzz of other conversations taking place around her. “You and I have some unfinished business, Ms Dhaggerr. I’d like to meet with you privately … in your apartment, perhaps?”

“Unfinished business?” Fonya’s mind returned to the last time this human had been in her apartment. “After that night, I never heard from you … never expected to see you again! I thought … was afraid, actually, you might have been killed during the damned war.”

Xiùlán’s smile was mostly hidden from view, but it colored her voice. “I’ll finish my drink …” she looked at the few people moving to the exit before adding, “… then leave in a few minutes. You take your time … have your dinner. There’s no rush. I’ll meet you outside your home.”

♦ FOUNDATIONS, ECHO WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Fonya Dhaggerr walked towards her apartment as briskly as she could manage; after spending ten hours mostly on her feet waiting tables at Krieger’s, tired back, legs and feet were literally screaming in protest. She knew the job was a dead end but hadn’t managed to save enough credits to make a move away from her seemingly pointless existence. Fonya hadn’t totally lost the dream of making a better life for herself, but sometimes, on the one day a week she didn’t have to work, she looked at the meager balance in her savings and simply wanted to weep in despair.

Her attention was drawn to a slight shimmer beside the entrance to her apartment. A cloaking device? But no heat signature … She pondered this as the shimmer resolved itself into the form of the tall human female, Yuán. Walking up to the woman, she said, “Your cloak is very good … I couldn’t see any heat signature at all.”

Xiùlán smirked, “Lots of improvements made during the Reaper War.” She stood aside to allow the batarian to unlock and open the door, then followed her inside. With the door closed and locked, Xiùlán activated her omnitool and used it to sweep the apartment for listening devices. Finding none, she pulled the hood back to reveal her face and unfastened her leather cloak, revealing the same deep-jade trimmed, dull-black armor Fonya remembered from before. The woman sat in one of the two chairs while motioning for the batarian to sit in the other, crossed her left ankle over her right thigh, then got right down to business.

“My then, Ms Dhaggerr … I’m sure you must remember visiting an agent for the Shadow Broker before the war, after enabling the illegal sale of an asari artifact from Kryllê Ghydgryz to the Blue Suns on Omega Station.” When Fonya silently nodded, Xiùlán continued. “It may interest you to
know I helped my Qingfu … my lover … recover that artifact. It now resides in a museum on Thessia.”

Fonya shook her head sorrowfully. “I never forgot your visit, shortly after that salarian agent relocated me here from Omega Station. I probably would have been murdered there if he hadn’t intervened.” She looked down for a moment before adding, “And the creds you gave me were a real help, Yuán. I really appreciate your kindness … then, and now. The number of humans that will even notice a batarian are infrequent; fewer still are those that will actually speak with any of my race.”

“You’re a person, Fonya … an intelligent being. Makes no difference to me what species you are. I admit, there have been times when I wished for the death of every batarian I encountered, but those were all males, and either slavers or pirates. I attempt to treat anyone I encounter with respect, unless they’re attempting to kill me …” she chuckled as she concluded, “… which always forces me to do otherwise.”

A pained expression washed over her features for a brief instant before she continued. “I came here tonight because an agent working for the Shadow Broker contacted me yesterday.” Well, she is an agent. “I was asked to meet with you here in order to facilitate making a payment … one promised to you by the Broker’s agent on Omega, before Paddock Wiks brought you here and furnished you with a new identity to keep you safe from the Blue Suns.”

Fonya’s mouth fell open as all four eyes widened in surprise. Recovering her ability to speak, she stammered, “Really!? That salarian actually told the Broker … about me?”

“Why would he not, Ms Dhaggerr? The business of the Shadow Broker is gathering and selling information. Information that is obtained is worthless unless it can be profitably sold; once it is obtained, it is never forgotten … ever.”

“But … but, I’m just a nobody!” she cried. “Nobody gives a damn about me, Yuán … about us. As far as all the other races are concerned, it would have been better for the galaxy if we’d been completely eliminated by the Reapers.”

Xiùlán rose from her chair; dropping to a knee in front of her, she grasped a trembling hand and chided, “I give a damn, Fonya Dhaggerr … I care. I will agree the majority of the batarian race has done little to endear themselves to the other people of the galaxy, but I believe the blame for most of that falls to those governing the Hegemony.” Xiùlán gazed into Fonya’s lower eyes as she continued. “That rabid isolationism worked to the advantage of the Reapers. It’s now thought by many that batarians may no longer have a population diverse enough to sustain them as a race.”

Fonya placed her free hand across her ridged nose and mouth as she squeezed all eyes shut. Speaking through her fingers, she whispered, “I’ve heard as much at the tavern in the evenings, and more. Khar’shan is a global wasteland … the biosphere has been completely decimated … Kite’s Nest … the entire cluster! … virtually destroyed. Since the end of the war, some of the big Reapers have been working at restoration projects in each system there, but I truly fear for our future, Yuán.”

Xiùlán released Fonya’s hand and stood erect. “Well, I think what I’m about to do will improve your future, Ms Dhaggerr.” She activated her omnitool, made several entries, then closed it as the omnitool on Fonya’s wrist self-activated. “The new balance of your savings account,” she said.

Fonya was having a difficult time keeping her mouth closed as she looked in disbelief at the new total displayed on the tool. “81,850 credits? … you added nearly 80,000 credits to my account?”
Xiùlán smiled. “I know it’s not as much as you might have hoped for, but considering that Ghydgryz was never going to pay you even one tenth of a single cred, the Broker believes it to be a fair amount. And once Aria T’Loak gets done squeezing Ghydgryz on Omega, all the credits in the galaxy won’t be enough to make his pain go away.”

The batarian rose from her chair to stand right in front of this intriguing human. “I had totally given up hope of ever seeing a payday from that encounter, Captain Yuán. This is … simply amazing.” She punctuated her statement by suddenly throwing her arms around the woman in a tight hug. A surprised Xiùlán returned the earnest hug, even as she wondered why all batarians couldn’t be a nice as this one female.

Fonya pushed back first, before the embrace could become awkward; this prompted Xiùlán to chuckle as she commented, “Of all the batarians I’ve encountered, you are the first that has ever hugged me.”

Wiping tears from her face, she replied, “There are very few that ever receive such from me, Yuán. Batarians generally don’t engage in displays of affection, even between each other. But …” she hesitated before continuing in a slightly embarrassed tone. “You are a special person, Yuán Xiùlán … an amazing human! You didn’t need to come all the way down here to see me … this business could have been handled over a secure extranet connection.”

Xiùlán showed her teeth in a huge grin as she refastened her cloak and pulled the hood back over her head. “Now what would have been the fun in doing things that way?” She grasped a pair of cool hands and looked directly into the female’s lower eyes. “Take care of yourself, K’ath … er, Fonya Dhaggerr. Zhù nǐ xìngfú kuàilè.” [祝你幸福快樂 – I wish you (much) happiness.]

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

I had just settled down to perform another data inquiry regarding the willingness of Alliance upper brass to terminate the Ø7 program, based on the persuasive rhetoric of Admiral Owen Fletcher. It wasn’t enough that I could prove Cerberus was pulling his strings; I intended to have records in hand of General RaeLee Park’s many arguments against the program’s termination.

More importantly to my mind, I needed records of her arguments against allowing the sabotage and destruction of the MSV Anixara to proceed—again, because of Cerberus—when Griff and I had come up with a viable plan to prevent it.

The computer was downloading a virtual treasure-trove of records when my personal comms system trilled to announce a secure incoming message. My heart soared upon seeing the ident. code. I thought the word ACCEPT! … my omnitool activated and made the connection faster than I could have completed the task by hand. “Xiùlán! Wǒ de ài! [我的愛！– My love!]

“It’s good to see you, Sà mǐ! I just wanted you to know I left a certain batarian female on the Citadel in a very happy mood.” Xiùlán giggled, something heard infrequently from her. “I even received a hug from her … it was kinda sweet, actually.”

I put on my best ‘jealous lover’ face as I asked, “Sweet, huh? Sounds like you enjoyed it, Ai … should I be worried about the competition?

There was no way my attempt at an expression of jealousy could fool this woman, particularly since it concerned a batarian. “The hug was nice, Sà mǐ, but I’m glad she didn’t try to kiss me. Have you ever seen a batarian’s teeth?” She grimaced at the thought. “Bù, xièxièi!” [不，谢谢！– No, thank you!] With a slight shake of her head, she continued, “I just wanted you to know
she’s truly grateful to the Shadow Broker for the additional credits in her savings account. She had totally given up ever seeing a payment of any kind from that experience.”

“That entire mission is not something I care to repeat, ever. You scared the living ’ell outa me on that stinkin’ station, Ai!” I frowned as I added, “Being able to help K’ath Din’sari … or Fonya Dhaggerr … completes the business she began by going to the Broker’s agent back in 2181. Sounds like getting a hug from her was thanks enough, but you have my gratitude as well.”

I looked down for a moment, wishing I could say what I was thinking … share with her everything I was doing. Returning my gaze to her image on my monitor, I simply concluded with, “Thanks for calling me … for telling me about Fonya. At least I can feel good about that.” I waved as I said, “Gotta go. Stay safe out there, Xiùlán. Méiyǒu nǐ de ài wǒ de shēnghuó shì bù wánzhèng de!”

[沒有你的愛我的生活是不完整的 – Without your love, my life is incomplete!]

She gave me a broad smile as she replied to my statement of love for her. “You need to continue practicing your Mandarin, my love. Wǒ duì nǐ de ài tiānchángdìjū, sà mǐ!” [我對你的愛天長地久，薩米 – My love for you is as enduring as the sky and the earth, Sà mǐ!] Stay safe! … and please? … for me? Watch your back.”

She terminated the connection, allowing me to honestly relax. I had to be so damned careful when I spoke with her; it really pained me that I could no longer share everything going on in my own life with the woman that loved me unconditionally. The data I’m uncovering will be stirring up a lot of shit during the next few weeks and months … best for her if she has no idea what I’m doing. Crap I’m digging up could place her in an impossible situation. Taking over as the Shadow Broker had seemed like a good idea … at the time. But now? … I was finally beginning to realize just how damned isolated I’d become. I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes to all the data streaming across the various monitors around me as I dry-scrubbed my face with both hands. Looks like Oriana isn’t the only one thinking about this isolated existence … except mine has cost me so much more. Shit!
Return To Thessia

*Karma comes after everyone eventually. You can't get away with screwing people over your whole life, I don't care who you are. What goes around comes around. That's how it works. Sooner or later the universe will serve you the revenge that you deserve. — Jessica Brody, The Karma Club*

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**Cabal** – Elite, all female turian infantry units created to isolate the rare individuals possessing biotic abilities.

**Irin** – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Irìngù-Ebjìzkur’

**Kawuk’sa** – an extremely strong insult, literally, a “graverobber” or “corpse-eater” (Batarian; source, CDN)

**Ø7** – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

- The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

**OSD** – Optical Storage Device, analogous to present-day digital recording disks.

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♦ **Ahn’kahar Station, Stre nuus System · Horsehead Nebula ♦

“What can we do for you today, Ms Traynor?” Spectre RachaeL Shepard and Lady Liara T’Soni peered at my image on their viewscreen as Shepard attempted to keep a neutral expression on her face; I expected she had a very good idea about why I was contacting them so soon after my recent visit.

“Lady Liara … Spectre Shepard. I have information for you, Spectre, but first, I have a request I hope you can help me with.” RachaeL’s expectant silence prompted me to continue on. “I know from my research that Garrus Vakarian is now a trusted advisor to Primarch Adrien Victus on Palaven. I have to wonder if, with the seriousness of what I hope you are willing to reveal to the Council, I should have a sit-down meeting with Garrus … see how he feels about my revelations concerning the true fate of MSV Anixara.”

A worried frown was the Spectre’s only reaction; Liara responded with a question of her own. “You’re not planning on revealing your real identity and capabilities, are you?”

“That’s the last thing I want to do, Liara. If he needs to actually speak with my employer …” I grinned at them both, “… Buchanan makes a thoroughly convincing Broker. Must be his size. We came up with this plan on our return trip back … one of us as Broker while the other one is out.”

RachaeL laughed at that. “I have to think you’re correct, Ms Traynor. So, when would you like to have this meeting with Garrus? And where? Would it be simpler to have him meet us on the Citadel?”

“Actually, I would like to return to Thessia – the ship about which Griff contacted you should be at T’Sere Shipyards by now. I’d like the chance to see it myself, maybe speak with Matriarch Tralis concerning needed repairs and upgrades.”

Shepard nodded her head as she commented, “That sounds like a good idea, actually. It would be good to see Garrus again, and we can have you and Garrus spend the night, so there’ll be plenty of time for both of you to discuss the fate of the Anixara. I’ll contact him – set it up for you.”

“Thanks, Shepard. Oh, and Liara … Aria T’Loak will probably be raising hell on Illium shortly.
The Broker’s agent on Omega tried to give her the data concerning Jona Sederis stealing Eezo, and that unpaid transaction fee on Omega; she refused to speak with a mere agent … wanted Bray to take the info.” I sighed as I thought back to my conversation with the pirate queen.

“She insisted on speaking with the Broker personally, so the salarian routed the connection through his own comms systems … which kept the Broker’s location secret.” With a chuckle, I added, “She found both subjects to be of great interest, particularly the location of Sederis, but the Broker had to put Aria in her place, something I know really chapped her ass.”

The asari rolled her eyes at the news before commenting, “Not what I’d hoped to hear, but it appears you managed to keep yourself above the fray … that’s good, Sammy. Don’t get personally involved … leave that to your agents and enforcers.”

Shepard’s expression showed concern. “She doesn’t suspect the Broker’s true identity, does she?”

“I don’t see how. She was looking really hard at the image on her screen, but even the best vid-monitors cannot display something that is not there.”

Shepard nodded in relief. “That’s good, Sammy. I’d hate to think of the lengths that old witch would go to track you down.” After a brief pause, she said, “Give me a day or two to arrange for our turian friend to meet you here. I’ll contact you when I have confirmation.”

“Sounds good, Spectre. Lady Liara …” I terminated the connection and went to find Griff.

Before I was able to track down my partner, Chinami’Taelas succeeded in tracking me down – not that I was difficult to find. “I have a progress report for you, Ms Traynor. Can we talk?”

“Of course, Chinami. Let’s go to the lounge.” Griff and I had started referring to our dining area as a lounge, since it seemed to be the one place we visited together on a regular basis. It was handy to already be in the compartment where we could relax for a bit after finishing a meal.

Upon entering the lounge, I moved to the beverage station to fix a cup of tea for myself; Chinami prepared a cup of Rannochian tea for herself, to which I commented, “I’m glad you can share a beverage with me while we talk.” I sat down beside her and took a sip from my cup.

“As am I, Sammy. On Illium, I always had to eat by myself, unless I was sitting with others of my species, or happened to be among turians.” After a brief pause, she set a datapad on the table between us and continued, “Here’s my status report on the programs controlling the environmental ops on this station; I discovered and was able to purge several especially vile bits of interference software from the atmosphere processor, along with the heating and cooling controls.”

“So, we shouldn’t have any more problems?”

“Actually…” Realizing her response was not something I wished to hear, the young quarian dipped her head momentarily before explaining. “Actually, I discovered the same software on the atmo-processor, among the same lines of code, on three consecutive mornings. The thing is, I had already scrubbed that malicious software from the servers.”

“I thought you had isolated those bits of code on a stand-alone. How? …”

“Ahn’Kahar Station was, until yesterday evening, receiving environmental programming updates from Minuteman Station. The VI is still operational there, and I believe it is simply auto-executing instructions entered by the Illusive Man during the early stages of the Reaper war.”
“Aw, shit! That bloody piker is long-since dead, and he’s still influencing things here?” I took a few sips from my cup as I gave the matter some thought. The solution I came up with was not something I looked forward to doing. “It sounds like someone needs to go to Minuteman in order to modify that VI’s program … or terminate it altogether.”

Chinami shook her head in near perfect imitation of a human’s non-verbal ‘NO’. “Terminating that VI wouldn’t be a good idea, Sammy. The station is devoid of life, yet is still functional because of its VI control. I looked at the data gathered when Normandy and Hong Kong were in the systems here … the remnants of Lazarus Station are also nearby, still in dark space. It appears the Illusive Man preferred this nebula’s location for siting his headquarters and research facilities.”

“Will blocking the updates at this end be enough?”

She touched the datapad on the table, saying, “It’s all outlined in here. I see no reason to allow that VI continued access to this station’s computers. Since the Illusive Man and Cerberus are dead, you can employ whomever you wish to keep the operating systems here up to date. The Shadow Broker appropriated an abandoned space station for your use, Ma’am. Space salvage laws make no distinctions concerning the way a recovered station or ship must be used.”

I finished my tea, set the cup down and turned towards her, innocent expression firmly in place. “It sounds as if you are applying for a full-time position as a software engineer, Ms Taelas.”

Chinami, having dialed back the opacity of her mask to its minimum tint, met my eyes as she whispered, “It has been difficult for me … being away from the fleet and my people. You … and Mr Buchanan … have treated me as an equal. After my experiences on Illium, being bound to Synthetic Insights by that contract? … it’s really nice to work for people that seem to care about me as a person, instead of some ignorant suit rat that shouldn’t be seen or heard.”

I took her gloved hand in mine as I replied, “You’re no suit rat, Chinami … don’t ever think that! … and we do care about you. I’m glad you’re happy here, but my offer—the Shadow Broker’s offer—is still valid. Either Griff or I will take you to the Migrant Fleet, or Rannoch, whenever you are ready to return. All you have to do is say the word.”

The skin next to her eyes crinkled in response to the smile hidden by the lower portion of her mask. “I appreciate that, Sammy. But I feel I am not yet ready to return to my people. I want to stay here on the station … as long as you still want me, that is.”

“I’ll have the techs install the rest of the isolation emitters in your quarters, Chinami. You may as well be comfortable while you’re working for us.” I placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed slightly as I added, “Thanks for choosing to stay.”

Shortly after lunch, I received a call from Spectre Shepard. “I spoke with Garrus, Sammy. He didn’t seem surprised to learn of your resignation from the Alliance Navy … if fact, he expressed some surprise that it had taken you so long to make the jump.” Rachaël grinned as she concluded, “He was a bit concerned that I wouldn’t tell him what you were doing these days; figured I’d leave that up to you.” She laughed as she concluded, “He actually said ‘What the hell … I guess it really doesn’t matter. I’m coming to visit with you and Liara. If Sammy just happens to be there when I visit, so much the better!’”

“I’m sure we’ll have lots to discuss. Did he give you a date when he can meet with me?”

“I told him the sooner, the better. Honestly, I just want to get this damned mess settled and behind me … behind us, Sammy, so we can get on with our lives.” She cocked her head as she asked a
question for which I had no answer. “Any ideas on how the Alliance can compensate the turians for the loss of that ship and everyone on board?”

“None. But, with your permission, I would like to have an Alliance Marine General accompany me for this meeting with Garrus … and I’m hoping you’ll be joining in on the discussion yourself, Spectre.” I grinned wickedly as I continued, “The human councilor will probably soil himself when he finally hears about this, and I expect Councilor Sparatus will be calling for someone’s head, as long as it’s not his own. My thoughts are that Garrus can quietly discover the Primarch’s wishes for what form the compensation from the Systems Alliance should take.”

“It would be nice if we could avoid a repeat of the First Contact War. Thing is, Harbinger will never allow another such conflict to begin.”

“I suspect the Repositories would only interfere after shots were actually fired, but you shared an intimate relationship with Harbinger, so know his mind better than any living soul today. He’s the reason you regained your human form.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” Shepard smiled. “Okay then. Plan on arriving tomorrow morning. It’ll give you, your general and Garrus a bit of time to have a discussion before we sit down for lunch. I’ll join in afterwards, and hope to have plans in place to deal with the inevitable fallout.”

“Sounds good, Shepard … and thank you. I really appreciate you allowing us to invade your sanctuary.” I broke the connection and sat back as I reconsidered the wisdom of stirring up unpleasant memories from the recent past. I concluded that I was doing the right thing, even if my motives were all about exacting revenge against a high-ranking Alliance officer. The dirty bastard had begun taking credits from the Illusive Man long before I joined the Ø7 program; now, it was time—past time, actually—for the late Admiral Owen Fletcher to be exposed for the Cerberus pawn he had become.

Having secured a meeting on neutral ground with Garrus, I sent a contact request to General RaeLee Park, hoping as I did so that she would be able to accommodate my short-notice request to accompany me the Thessia.

An hour after my conversation with Spectre Shepard, I accepted the return call from Vancouver; General Park’s image greeted me as soon as the connection through multiple relays and countless light-years of distance solidified. “Ms Traynor? What may I do for you?”

“Actually, I need to ask a favor of you … one that will require a bit of travel tomorrow morning.” I continued quickly, hoping to head off any protests. “In regards to the destruction of a certain vessel before the war, I have arranged a meeting for us that will require a trip to Thessia.”

She reacted with a throaty chuckle before replying softly, “Why am I not surprised at the speed with which you set this up, Sammy?” She retrieved a datapad from among several on her desk; after inspecting the contents on its screen, she said, “You’re in luck. There’s nothing on my schedule that won’t keep for one …” she looked at my image on her terminal; seeing me holding up two fingers, she corrected as she continued, “… or two days.” She set the device down and asked, “Who are we meeting, and where?”

“Spectre Rachaël Shepard was kind enough to help me set up a meeting with Garrus Vakarian, the top adviser to the Turian Primarch; she also offered to allow us to stay with her and Lady Liara at their estate, which is where the meeting will take place.”

“Why should we meet with him at all, Traynor?” Park’s tone was colored by a touch of anger.
“We need to learn how the turian government will react to the revelation concerning the MSV Anixara, and Garrus can be trusted, Ma’am … I trust him. You know he was part of the Normandy crew and had first-hand experience with Cerberus during the war … fought against and killed many of the Illusive Man’s indoctrinated troops. I know he won’t promise anything he cannot deliver, and he can smooth the way for the Alliance to make reparations, before Spectre Shepard presents the evidence to the Galactic Council.”

RaeLee heaved a heavy sigh. “I firmly expected Fletcher’s actions would eventually come back around to bite all of us in the ass.”

“Not you, General! I intend to see you held completely blameless for Fletcher’s sins. I have recordings of all the meetings in which Fletcher vehemently argued for allowing the ship’s destruction, as well as his illogical push to have the Ø7 program terminated.” I smirked as I revealed, “Those meetings also contained every one of your impassioned pleas to save the Ø7 program, and to allow Griff and myself to prevent the destruction of that ship.”

Park, already aware of my findings, asked, “So, why do all of this, Sammy? What do you hope to achieve?”

“Justice … long delayed.” I smiled. “So, can you be ready to leave the base at 0700 tomorrow?”

With a solemn expression, Park sighed a reply. “I’ll be waiting at the gate, Sammy.”

“Sounds good. I’ll have another OSD containing additional info to give you when I arrive.”

♦ SYSTEMS ALLIANCE WESTERN NORTH AMERICA HQ · VANCOUVER, BC ♦

I approached the main entrance to Alliance headquarters at exactly 0658 and was not surprised to see a uniformed woman standing there, a few meters from the guard shack and to one side of the gate. General RaeLee Park looked every bit the career military officer I had come to know and respect during my time in the Navy; I considered it a privilege to remain friends with her, even after my resignation from the Service.

Pulling my X3M to a stop beside her, I opened the canopy and side door for her while saying, “Good morning, General. Beautiful day for a trip, wouldn’t you say?”

She chuckled as she placed her travel bag and briefcase in the back, before deftly lowering herself into the seat beside me. With a small grin, she asked, “How are we traveling to Thessia, Sammy? … Hope we’re not flying commercial.”

I glanced at her as I released the flight controls to the onboard VI. “No, Ma’am. I have a much more capable method of inter-cluster travel … not that I think you will approve of it.”

I received a questioning look followed by a shake of her head, but she remained silent for a few minutes, until my speeder slowed its speed and turned to approach a towering, jet-black remnant from the Reaper War. “Sammy?”

“Trust me, RaeLee. You are about to have the introduction of a lifetime.” I watched as she sat back in her seat and stared with equal parts curiosity, awed amazement, and maybe a touch of plain old fear as the speeder floated up from behind Iringù-Ebiddenk’s structure; in a matter of moments, we were docked within the destroyer-class Repository.

As the canopy slid forward, I scrambled out to stand beside the nose of the craft. “Come on, General. Let’s get inside so I can introduce you.”
She climbed out slowly, retrieved her travel bag and briefcase, then joined me as I opened the hatch to Irin’s reception area. Cheerful music could be heard at a low volume as the hatch closed behind us. “Iringù-Eßizkur, this is General RaeLee Park … General, Irin is the Repository that delivered supplies to Normandy during our trip back from the galaxy’s edge. She’s been a substantial contributor to my success as a data broker.”

The general looked around in stunned silence as Irin spoke to her. ›Welcome, Park-General. I am pleased to meet a friend of Traynor’s‹.

Hooking an arm through one of Park’s, I guided her to the observation lounge. “Have a seat, RaeLee. Irin doesn’t have viewports, but the monitors are a good substitute. Would you care for some coffee or tea?”

She sat heavily in one of the comfortable chairs before answering. “I think I need a stiff drink, Sammy! What on Earth have you done!?”

I grabbed a bottle of whiskey and a couple of shot glasses. Returning to sit beside her, I poured a healthy measure into one glass and handed it to her. “Sip it, General,” I said with a smile. “I don’t want you to arrive on Thessia so blasted you can’t walk a straight line.”

With a look that could have seared flesh, she slammed the contents down in one go, closing her eyes and scrunching up her face as the liquid burned its way down her throat. With a gasp, she looked back at me through narrowed lids and said, “Sammy, I wasn’t aware you had a Reaper as your personal transport. How in the flaming hell? …”

I interrupted her with a hand held up, responding, “Irin is my friend, RaeLee, just as if she were flesh and blood. I know she’s a mechanical construct, but Shepard’s choice to end the war is responsible for the organic aspects of her existence.”

She stared at me for several moments before finally giving voice to her feelings. “Well, shit!”

I chuckled as Iringù-Eßizkur’s melodious voice came through the speaker between our chairs. ›I am ready to leave for the Serpent Nebula, Friend-Samantha‹.

“No, I’m not. In the meantime, I’ll tell the general about our short history together.” I sat back in my chair, wordlessly sent a request to Irin to enable the monitor in front of us, then turned to face RaeLee as I began to tell her how Iringù-Eßizkur and I had met, during our trip back to civilization within the Nazara-class Repository, Žiuk’Durmah.

♦ OMEGA STATION · OMEGA NEBULA, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM ♦

Nyreen Kandros had been summoned to meet with the station’s Queen, Aria T’Loak. It had taken the turian female nearly a year to recover from injuries sustained during Aria’s campaign to kick Cerberus forces off the station; Aria had rewarded her for her efforts—if reward was the correct term—by giving her a legitimate position as head of station security. As such, she answered to no one but Aria on matters concerning her job; even Bray, Aria’s batarian bodyguard and nearly constant companion, had to answer to Nyreen.

The position came with a security contingent that numbered close to a thousand, the majority of which were turian; of these, all were former Cabal members … fearsome biotic warriors, trained to handle the deadliest infiltration missions. The remainder were a nearly equal mixture of krogan and batarians, all former military or mercenaries.
Prior to and immediately after Cerberus gained control of the station, Nyreen had been the leader of what was now Omega’s security force … the Talons, a gang that operated completely in the shadows, such that even Aria was unaware of the true extent of their numbers or influence. Seeking to save a group of civilians being fired upon by a pair of Cerberus-created Adjutants, Nyreen had detonated an entire belt of grenades at their feet; while the explosion killed both abominations, the concussive wave had propelled her hard into an adjacent wall.

The combined forces of the explosion and impact nearly killed her … her reward had been nine weeks in a hospital bed, followed by almost forty weeks of rehabilitation. Even now, she still experienced sharp twinges of pain in various parts of her body.

She thought about all of this as she used the back entrance to Aria’s private apartment under Afterlife. Keying in her personal identicode, she opened the hatch and silently slipped inside. After allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkened area before her, she moved into Aria’s small office area, listening carefully to the volume and beat of the music above. After waiting for a few minutes, she detected a noise beyond the back wall, indicating the asari was riding the elevator down from her observation deck in Afterlife above.

The asari, her scowl seemingly a permanent expression these days, actually smiled ever so slightly as she caught sight of the turian. “Ah, Nyreen. I told Bray there could be no one else down here, as there’s no one on this entire station foolish enough to attempt an invasion of my personal space.” With a small chuckle, Aria stepped in front of her security chief and used her arms to pull the turian into an intimate hug. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered. After placing a long kiss on Nyreen’s mouth, she added, “You know I always have room in my bed for you.”

Kandros flared her mandibles, a turian expression of happiness. “I’m pleased to see you as well, Aria.” Narrowing her eyes slightly, she added, “Sleeping in your bed is wonderful, but you always want to have sex with me first, and most evenings I’m just too damned sore and tired to participate.” Knowing the effect her close presence had on Aria, Nyreen reached in to nuzzle the soft, violet-blue skin under her jaw, a move that brought a low moan from the asari’s throat.

A whispered protest of, “Dammit, Nyreen. You know what that does to me,” brought forth a small chuckle, which was transformed by the turian’s sub-harmonics into a sound both lustful and sensuous. Aria moaned again before reluctantly pushing Kandros away. Holding her by her waist at arm’s length, she shook her head slightly. “I still don’t know why we can’t seem to make us work.”

“We’re both too independent, Aria. You’re an arrogant, scheming, back-stabbing bitch. It’s what I’ve always loved about you.”

The scowl had instantly returned at Nyreen’s statement. “The same could be said of you, Kandros … except, you’re just too damned good-hearted. I suppose that’s because your lifespan is measured in mere decades, rather than centuries.” To show there was no hard feelings at the apparent insult, Aria pulled Nyreen in for another sensuous kiss, then released her in order to take a few steps and sit behind her desk.

Picking up a datapad, she set it on the far edge of the desk as Nyreen sat down across from her. “I have a job for you … one that will provide a real challenge to some of your Cabal members.” She continued explaining as Nyreen picked up the datapad to inspect the contents on its screen. “The person behind the theft and illegal sale of recovered Eezo has been located. She needs to be eliminated … permanently, and publicly.” Blue eyes glittered in enmity. “Jona Sederis. She thinks it’s funny to tweak my nose while she fills Eclipse coffers with credits … my fucking credits, Nyreen!”
The turian studied the information on the screen for several moments before asking, “Is it safe to presume everything on here is accurate?”

“In all the decades I’ve done business with him, I’ve never had a bad tip or inaccurate data from the Shadow Broker, Nyreen. I have Sederis’ location on Illium! Fucking ardat is still leading the Eclipse; info I have says her body is so screwed up she cannot utilize her biotics … can’t employ the concentration necessary to pull up the required dark energy, even for a simple pull.”

The scowl deepened slightly as her eyes narrowed to murderous slits. “I want you to drag her ass out of the hole she’s hiding in and relieve her of her head! … understand? I’ll mount it on a pike outside the club … a warning, to anyone thinking about breaking my one rule!”

Nyreen’s eyes narrowed slightly in response. “You serious about this? … You really expect me to bring back her head like … like some kind of stinking trophy? That’s just … really cold, Aria!”

“Don’t fail me in this, Nyreen. You know I love you … more, perhaps, than I’ve ever loved anyone my entire life. That said, you need to realize how important this is to me. Crazy burned up slut thinks she’s beyond my reach! The Eclipse needs to be taught that no one fucks with Aria T’Loak and lives to enjoy it! … no one!” She rose from her chair, a signal that the meeting was over. “Regular updates, Nyreen. I’m looking forward to having this business behind me.”

♦

T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

Partially due the speed in which Iringù-Eẞizkur traversed the distances between Earth and the Charon relay, as well as that between the Athena Nebula relay and Thessia, and the differences in Vancouver local time compared to local time in Armali, Irin’s clawed feet touched down on the pavement of the T’Soni estate at 0820, local time.

During the nearly three-and-a-half hours of actual travel time between the two planets, I had told General Park nearly everything; while revealing nothing concerning my position as the Shadow Broker, I explained that I had fallen into a new career as a data-broker. My personal experiences during the Normandy’s trip back from the outer reaches of the galaxy really began to interest her when I told of how I ended the life of the Prothean Javik; she pointed out that I had obviously learned the lessons Xiùlán taught me exceedingly well.

I rose from my chair, prompting RaeLee to do the same as she asked me, “So, do we leave by the same method we used to come aboard?”

I shook my head in response as I addressed the air around me. “Deploy the transfer tube, Irin.”

After a questioning look, RaeLee followed me to the reception area, where a hatch had irised open to reveal the entrance to the null-gravity tube Irin had lowered to the ground outside. I smiled to ease her nervousness and stated, “I’ll go first, okay? Give it a few seconds, then step in after me; you’ll float gently to the ground.” Stepping through the entrance, I felt as if my body’s entire weight had been negated … almost.

I looked up in time to see the general step through the portal with her forearms crossed hard against her chest, as if she were leaping into a body of water. I called up to her, “Relax, RaeLee … enjoy the ride!” Looking down at me, I could see her doubtful expression gradually transform to one of acceptance.

Gazing down past my feet at the bottom of the tube, I bent my knees slightly—truth be known, I didn’t need to bother—in anticipation of my boots contacting the pavement; Iringù-Eẞizkur’s null-
gravity device set me down quite gently. I moved through the exit portal to allow clearance for RaeLee’s touchdown, which was five seconds after mine.

“That’s one helluva ride, Traynor!” Her face was slightly flushed. “I imagine it works in reverse for boarding?”

“Exactly. It’s really quite extraordinary.” I led the general past the left side forward clawed foot, then looked up at Irin’s face … she had slid the cover panels aside in order to have an unobstructed sensor view of the area around her. Rather than offer my thanks verbally, I used my thoughts to send a text as I rubbed the cold metal of her foot. »Thank you, Irin.«

» You are most welcome, Friend-Samantha. As always, it is my pleasure to be of service. «

I turned to find three of my best friends in the galaxy approaching from the edge of the pavement. I gave the clawed foot an affectionate pat, then moved to intercept the approaching welcoming party. Since I was accompanied by a stranger, their greetings were more formal. I held my hands out to greet Liara, then Shepard, then introduced General Park to each of them, pleased that she followed my lead by presenting her hands palms up in greeting.

I turned to the big turian who had walked up with them, but had then hung back as Liara and Rachaël greeted Park and me. “Garrus … good to see you once more.” We clasped each other’s forearms as he replied, “Samantha Traynor. Last time we traveled together was just before Javik attempted to destroy Žiuk’Durmah near the Charon relay.”

He tilted his head back to look up at Irin’s face. “Iringù-Eßizkur left Žiuk’Durmah and carried Liara and me through the relay …” returning his blue eyes to my face, he continued, “… leaving you on the Normandy to eventually deal with Javik. Actually, I don’t believe I ever bid you farewell before I left the ship for home … an oversight for which you have my apologies, Ms Traynor.” He flared his mandibles in happiness, asking, “How have you been since that time?”

“Oh, we have a great deal to talk about, Garrus, but first, I’d like you to meet a dear friend …and a trusted mentor.” I looked to RaeLee as I continued, “Advisor Vakarian, this is General RaeLee Park. General, this is Garrus Vakarian, advisor to the Primarch.”

After the greetings were done, Shepard walked ahead of the rest of us beside RaeLee; Garrus and Liara fell in on either side of me as we all walked to the house. “It’s still early, Samantha …” Liara said. “… would either of you care for some breakfast?”

I realized that, for me, it was closer to lunch time than breakfast, but I didn’t have it within me to turn down an offer to enjoy a meal with Liara and Rachaël. “I can’t speak for RaeLee, but actually, breakfast sounds good. What about you, Garrus? Did you eat before leaving Palaven?”

He grinned at me before answering Liara directly. “I would enjoy having breakfast with my former traveling companion.” He looked around as he added, “This is my first visit to your home since your bonding ceremony … I’m looking forward to having a more relaxed visit this time.”

I seriously doubt you’ll be so damned relaxed once you’ve heard why I’m here, came the thought.

During breakfast, I entertained Garrus with the story of my participation—along with Zaeed Massani and Master Gunnery Sergeant Sandra Patton—in the elimination of Blue Suns leadership on the Citadel.

He expressed amazement that Sandee and I hadn’t died in that explosion. “This the same woman I
met on Lazarus Research Station? … the one in charge of *Normandy’s* weapons systems?"

“Master Gunnery Sergeant, Garrus—or *Master Guns*—and yes, she’s completely in charge of the ship’s weapons and all the small arms.” I smiled slightly at the memory. “First thing she did after walking out of the hospital was eliminate all the non-standard small arms. She outfitted everyone with Alliance approved weapons in order to standardize replacements and training, then drilled everyone at the live-fire range until she was satisfied in their abilities.”

Garrus harrumphed. “I’ll bet that wasn’t popular with some of the Marines. And what about her own sniper rifle … that J.T. Helix model 10?”

I giggled as I replied, “Some of them didn’t like it, but Corporal Vic promptly put the dissenters in their place.” My grin disappeared as I thought about Patton. “Sandee retired her personal rifle for an Alliance manufactured Black Widow, Garrus. She’s improved the performance of *Normandy’s* main gun and updated the targeting programs running the defensive weaponry.”

Shaking his head slightly, he stated, “I knew there was something I liked about her, the very instant we met! Sounds like *Normandy* has the perfect person in charge of all the weapons, Sammy.”

Garrus had listened in amazingly controlled silence as I told him of everything Griff and I had done before the war; his only reaction to the revelation concerning the *MSV Anixara* was a subdued grunt. Sitting across the table from me, it was easy to see the news had upset him. After several moments of silence, in which he repeatedly dropped, spread and retracted his mandibles—a sure sign of his distress—he looked me in the eyes and calmly asked, “You’re sure of all this, Sammy?”

He glanced at General Park, who was seated beside me and casually sipping her tea, demonstrating an identical military stoicism to that of the turian seated across from her.

I realized I sounded a bit harsh as I replied, “I’m the one that compiled the information, Garrus. Cerberus wanted me dead … wanted to make me vanish! That I’m sitting with you today is not because the bastards didn’t try extremely hard to make that a reality.”

“Spirits!” After several moments, during which I continued enjoying my meal, he found his voice once more. “If it was anyone else sitting there telling me all this, I would have serious doubts about their credibility!” Turning his attention to RaeLee, he asked, “And you could do nothing to put a stop to this … this act of terrorism?”

I placed my open hand up as I interceded. “Garrus, I have the records … all of them. General Park is not to blame for what happened to the *Anixara*. You fought beside Shepard … you know how fanatical Cerberus troops were.” I dropped my hand to the table. “The Illusive Man was Jack Harper’s unofficial title … one he lived up to every day of his life after the First Contact War.”

“That was in 2157, Sammy.”

I nodded my head as I agreed, then added, “He began buying influence that very year, Garrus. The deaths of Ben Hislop and Eva Coré had an extremely negative impact on him, one he could never seem to get past.” I took a sip of *Kaffe* as I thought about those events. “Bastard eventually grew so powerful he was able to buy, then give orders to a large number of Alliance leaders … hell, even galactic leaders … tell them what to do, what to say … who to assassinate … all while holding no public office. I have the recordings, Garrus. Everything downloaded by Iringù-EBizkur from Lazarus and Minuteman stations when you and Liara visited, looking for the clones of Rachaël Shepard.”
“How did you? …” he started, then closed his mouth as he made the connection. “Spirits, Samantha,” he whispered, so quietly I wasn’t sure I heard him. “You took it over, didn’t you? … All of it!”

“ Took over what, exactly?” General Park was looking at me with new interest. “You’ve become a very effective data broker, Sammy … for evidence, I only need to look at the OSDs you gave me.” I looked directly at her and watched her expression change as realization slowly dawned. “Shit!” she exclaimed quietly. “ You’re the goddamned Shadow Broker, Sammy! It all makes perfect sense now. But how in the name of all? …”

I held up a hand. “Don’t jump to conclusions, RaeLee. I can prove I’m not the Shadow Broker. I will contact him, let you talk to him, if you wish.” I took a deep breath, sent an accusing look at Garrus, glanced at Shepard and T’Soni, then turned back to the general. “I work for him, is all. No dark, dangerous secrets. I’m an info broker … an extremely competent info broker, not unlike Lady Liara during her time on Illium.”

As I held my breath, waiting to see if she would accept my half-truth, I mentally sent a quick text to Buchanan. With the table and the linen concealing the purple glow of my omnitool, I sent, » Griff! Broker comms incoming! Be ready!«

Liara and Rachaél looked on interestedly; thankfully, they said nothing.

After nearly a minute of dead silence, she sighed heavily in acceptance. “Okay. Because it’s you, I’ll take what you’ve told me purely on faith, Sammy, but I sincerely doubt you’re a simple info broker. Hell, if you’re not the number one researcher in that organization …” She trailed off, then added, “I would hate to think that, with all our history, you would lie to me about something so damned important.” She paused, then asked, “So, all the data? … everything on those OSDs you gave me? All legit? Nothing doctored, by you or anyone else?”

“The Broker undoubtedly hires the best of the best, General.” I attempted to keep the relief I was feeling from coloring my voice. “Have your own techs … ones you can trust! … check the source codes for each segment of video, Ma’am … in fact, you taking the time to do that … to verify those vids are authentic, is something your bosses would expect you to do, before you present them as evidence against those traitors.”

I could still see a bit of doubt in her eyes, but she didn’t allow it to color her response. “I suppose we’d have to re-enter that black colossus in order to talk to the Broker?”

I answered with the truth. “Lady Liara had to deal with him occasionally in her capacity as an info broker on Illium. I’m sure her communications suite onsite here is capable of reaching him, if you’d rather remain on the ground.”

I looked meaningfully at Liara, who quickly spoke up. “Of course, Sammy … General Park? I will be happy to put everything in motion for you.” She rose from her chair and indicated the main door with a wave of her hand. “If you would? …” RaeLee looked at each of us as she silently stood. With a nod in Liara’s direction, she followed the asari out of the dining hall and down the passageway.

I didn’t expect more of a reply than the single, low-volume chime that indicated my message had been received. I could only hope my warning had been soon enough for Griff to get set up.
If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings’ – Dave Barry

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

Kaffe – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name,

the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Dammit, Sammy! Griff sealed the compartment door against intrusion, turned on the lights, pulled on the heavy cloak with its deep hood, then sat in the chair to inspect his image on the monitor. Satisfied his identity would be safe, he thought, Vocal modulator: ON; Video modulator: ON. His new omnitool reacted to his mental commands, setting up the necessary electronics to enable the charade. In less than two minutes, an incoming signal sequentially triggered several relays; Buchanan growled his response. “This is the Shadow Broker.” Not having seen her since before the war, he was surprised that she didn’t appear to have aged a bit during the intervening years.

“Samantha Traynor has presented me with some damning evidence concerning two high-ranking Alliance officers, one of which is still very much alive on the Citadel. She tells me she is now employed by you as a member of your research team. Is that true?”

“Not that it is any concern of yours, General Park, but yes … I hired her immediately upon her separation from the Alliance Navy, which was grossly under-utilizing her talents. Has she caused some problem about which I should be aware?” Griff instantly knew his question had slightly embarrassed her; that she would contact the Broker to verify Traynor’s assertions concerning her employment and research—her proof of Cerberus meddling in Alliance affairs—was highly irregular … before the Reaper war, no one in their right mind ever questioned information provided by the Shadow Broker.

Park’s reply was slightly apologetic in tone. “Please forgive my doubts, and the intrusion, Shadow Broker. It just seems so unusual that Traynor would agree to work for you.”

“Why would she not come to work for me? She is supremely talented, General … the absolute best at what she does.” Griff chortled. “Would you have the Shadow Broker settle for lower tier researchers?” The question flummoxed the general for a moment; before she could formulate a reply, he said, “Rhetorical question, General. The Shadow Broker is the best at what he does, because only the best—from all over the galaxy—are employed, as researchers, as agents, …” here he darkened his tone. “… as enforcers. The reputation of the Shadow Broker is beyond reproach, and will always remain so.”

Park sighed as she replied, “Thank you for your time, Shadow Broker. Again, my sincere apologies for this intrusion, and for my doubts concerning Samantha Traynor.”

She broke the connection, leaving Griff wondering if he had adequately covered Sammy’s ass. He
sent a quick mental text to her omnitool, then sat back in his chair. *Guess I’ll know shortly.*

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**T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA**

Accompanied by Liara, General Park returned to the dining hall to find Rachael and myself having a quiet conversation over steaming mugs of Kaffe; Garrus sat nearby with a mug of a reddish-purple liquid I knew to be a mixture of the turian equivalent of beet and carrot juice.

I covertly glanced at the message I’d just received from Griff; it consisted of just three question marks. Fortunately, I was able to mentally compose and send a reply of »STANDBY« without attracting notice.

RaeLee returned to her seat beside me and whispered, “Please forgive my seeming lack of faith in your story, Sammy; you’d think that after all this time I would know better. Still, I find it a bit odd that the most powerful data broker in the galaxy would allow you the freedom to pursue your own agenda.”

“He recruited me, General. I made my mission to bring Sutton’s and Fletcher’s actions … their treachery while wearing Alliance uniforms … a non-negotiable condition of me consenting to work for him. Imagine my surprise when he agreed that the truth concerning these two bastards needed to see the cold light of day.” I finished the last bit of Kaffe in my cup. “The primary reason the Shadow Broker has such a terrible reputation is because he doesn’t deal in innuendo, rumors or lies … just unvarnished truth … something that’s a very scary thing to most people, particularly those —like Jack Harper—whose entire existence revolved around promulgating falsehoods.”

Garrus spoke up. “So, my assumption about you was incorrect, Sammy … still, you and Griffen Buchanan were assigned to discover exactly how Cerberus intended to assassinate Raherix Ursivus. You’ve known all this time,” came the accusation. “Even on our voyage back from the edge of the galaxy, Samantha. Was a Spirits-be-damned piece of paper in your personal record the only reason you didn’t tell me about this?”

I sighed. “I’m telling you about this now, Garrus; it wasn’t something I could do while I was still in the damned Navy … and that’s just one of several reasons I resigned. We transferred all of Liara’s specialized equipment from the *Normandy* to Iringù-Eßizkur. You accompanied her to the Horsehead Nebula. After Shepard’s physical existence was restored, Admiral Hackett wanted me to become an info broker for the Alliance Navy … use all the equipment inside Irin for the sole benefit of the Alliance.”

I stood and paced about for a few moments, then added, “They would have eventually assigned someone to the job if I didn’t volunteer … thing is, Iringù-Eßizkur is not Alliance property—or anyone’s property—nor is the equipment inside her.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you couldn’t tell me about Raherix Ursivus, Sammy,” he grumped.

“Above my pay-grade back then. Griff and I were confined to quarters until after the ship—and Raherix Ursivus—was obliterated. And you wouldn’t even know about this if Michael Moser Lang or Kelsey Winters had been successful in murdering me on Arcturus Station.”

I turned on RaeLee, saying, “I distinctly remember telling you how much simpler it would have been if your fucking superiors had allowed us to stop Lang and save that ship! Unfortunately, it was too late for us to do anything after the fact, and I damned near paid the ultimate price for their decisions.”
Park actually looked somewhat embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Samantha … I truly am. Above your pay grade? … Above mine as well, make no mistake.” She turned towards Garrus. “Vakarian, what I truly need to know is what reparations the Hierarchy will require from the Alliance in order to put this matter behind us.”

Garrus quietly growled for a moment before responding. “At a minimum, a million credits … each! … for the families of each of the people aboard that ship when it was destroyed, with a 250 million credit bonus to the family of Raherix Ursivus, since he was the primary target of the plot. A billion credits to be paid to the ship’s manufacturer, for their damaged reputation and loss of business.”

General Park’s mouth fell open further upon hearing each of Vakarian’s demands. When finally able to again give voice to her thoughts, she quietly said, “That’s an enormous number of creds, Garrus. We kicked the turian’s asses during the Relay 314 incident … is this plan designed to simply bankrupt the Systems Alliance military as payback for that?”

“No in the least, General Park … furthest thing from my mind … or the Primarch’s.”

I quietly asked, “General Park? … a word? … in private?” I knew of something that would help the Alliance, but didn’t wish to share what I had to say with Garrus … or Shepard.

♦ OMEGA STATION · OMEGA NEBULA, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM ♦

Tulana Varinian passed a talon through the red-glow of the haptic lock barring entrance to her commander’s office. As second—a lieutenant—to Nyreen Kandros, Tulana was responsible for many of the day-to-day operations of the Talons; she knew her duties and did them well, so it was rare for her to be summoned to meet with her leader … rare, and just a bit troubling.

The haptic interface turned green and the hatch parted in the middle, allowing admittance. The female stepped into Kandros’ office, noting not for the first time the sparseness of furnishings … the total lack of luxuries of any kind. Nyreen’s office was virtually empty, containing nothing deemed to be impractical; there was a large desk, placed diagonally in a back corner of the compartment. A chair stood beside it … another chair across the space next to a free-standing lamp. Several small, mostly empty shelves were mounted on the two walls behind the desk. A large cabinet containing her armor and weapons stood to the side, just inside the doorway.

The overall impression had always been one of ruthless efficiency, as if possessing anything more than could be used by one person was an utterly selfish exercise in self-glorification.

Nyreen stood in greeting as her second approached her. “It’s been a while since we’ve chatted, Tulana. Please,” she indicated the chair with a small wave. “Have a seat.” Nyreen poured water from a small pitcher into a tumbler and sat it at the edge of the desk for her. She poured a bit more into her own glass, then took a sip of the contents before retaking her seat.

Handing a datapad to her lieutenant, she said in a quiet tone, “Aria has tasked me with a mission to Illium … I’m to recover a person she’s been tracking for a number of weeks.”

Varinian studied the information on the device’s small screen. “She found this person?”

Nyreen chuckled mirthlessly. “The Shadow Broker found her … Jona Sederis, living in exile on Illium, in Nos Aedelos. Her location was sold to Aria for a very high price … we need to make sure the only way she leaves Illium is dead, inside a stasis chamber.”
“Sederis!? Eclipse will fight tooth and nail to prevent her capture or her death.” Tulana studied her commander through narrowed eyes. “Why us? … why me?”

Nyreen placed her hands on the edge of her desk and leaned back. “I need the best soldiers we have for this mission, Tula, and I cannot leave the station. My absence would not go unnoticed by Eclipse – they have spies everywhere. But you …”

“I believe my absence would be noted as well,” Varinian said. “And there’s another problem. A group—no matter how small—of armed and armored turian females would be quite obvious in a asari majority population city like Nos Aedelos.” Studying the datapad in her hand, she observed, “Even if we kept to the shadows at night, we’d be made before we could get within two or three klicks of Sederis’ hiding place.”

“So, what would you suggest we do?”

“Sounds as if the Eclipse contingent needs to be completely eliminated from Illium, Nyreen, and I think we’d need more than four or five of us to accomplish that.” Tulana’s flanging sub-harmonics were nearly inaudible as she thought about what needed to happen. “Why not hire a merc team … an asari merc team … through the Shadow Broker?”

Nyreen sat forward; leaning over forearms resting on the desk with elbows cupped in her hands, she replied, “Two problems with that … number one is, Aria wants Jona’s head brought back to her … she wants to place it on a pike sitting in front of Afterlife.” She looked down, shook her head slightly and huffed, before returning her gaze to Varinian’s eyes. “I really don’t think a dead asari’s head mounted outside Afterlife would be good for business, but Aria generally gets what she wants, no matter the possible ramifications.”

“What’s the second problem?”

Nyreen flared her mandibles as she minutely shook her head. “The price Aria had to pay for Jona’s location was rather high. From her point of view, having to employ a merc team to capture Sederis —when she already employs security personnel on this station—would simply add insult to injury.”

“Let’s go talk to her, Nyreen … we need to convince her that using the Talons for this would be a foolish waste of resources.” Tulana sounded embarrassed when she quickly added, “And that sounded worse out loud than it did in my head, so I will not be telling Aria that using the Talons for a strike against the Eclipse is foolish.”

Nyreen sighed in resignation. “She told me she loves me, Tula. Guess we’ll discover if that’s enough to keep her from using her biotics to smear me all over her walls.”

Eyes glittering in barely controlled anger, Aria T’Loak attempted to rein in her biotics while struggling to understand why in hell her security chief was sitting in her office, suggesting she spend even more credits to put an end to Jona Sederis. “I gave you an assignment, Nyreen, yet it would seem you and your second are not up to the task. Can you explain to my satisfaction why I should hire mercenaries to put an end to the Eclipse on Illium?”

Nyreen, having learned long ago to never show fear in the face of Aria’s volatility, calmly replied, “Talon members are all turians, Aria. You want to eliminate an asari target, in a city populated by asari, on an asari controlled planet.” She quickly glanced at Varinian before directing her gaze back to the violet-blue face of her boss. “To get this done properly with the least amount of interference from Illium’s authorities, you need an asari commando team.”
Aria abruptly rose from her chair and began pacing around the small office. After several circuits, she asked in a seemingly calm voice, “Where in hell do I find such a team, Nyreen?”

“Contact the Shadow Broker’s agent, Aria. If he doesn’t know of a team, have him contact the Broker for that info. You provide a ship and clandestine support, the commandos can eliminate Jona Sederis and obliterate Eclipse from Illium. Your personal involvement is minimal, and you have plausible deniability should anyone get caught or killed during the operation.”

“Since when have I worried about taking the blame for anything I decide to do?”

Nyreen stood; stepping into the queen’s path to block her, she gently grasped her upper arms. “Aria, it’s a different galaxy since the end of the war, even out here in the Terminus. You may be queen of Omega Station, but if authorities in Nos Aedelos think they can tie you to a bunch of murdered citizens—no matter their affiliation—they’ll request the Galactic Council assign the Spectres to arrest and hold you for trial.”

With a malevolent grin, she growled, “They can try.”

Nyreen shook her head. “Aria, please.” The turian used her hold on Aria’s upper arms to gently close the distance between them until they stood cheek-to-mandible. Using only her sub-harmonics, she quietly observed, “This station has barely recovered from an occupation by Cerberus mechs, soldiers and abominations. They enslaved, abused and killed many hundreds of Omega’s citizens. They damn near burned out the machinery that keeps this station going, all while that Oleg Petrovsky bastard sat on his ass in your loft playing chess … when he wasn’t strutting around like some damned terrene ostrich. Do you really want more trouble?”

Aria stood, quiet as death and still as a statue for a number of moments, before using her hands on Nyreen’s hips to gently place a few centimeters between them. Once again able to look into brilliant amethyst eyes, the asari touched her forehead to the turian’s; with a heavy sigh, she said, “Dammit, Nyreen, look at me … look at what you’ve fucking done to me!” Shaking her head minutely, she continued, “I’ve grown soft, dammit. Between you and that self-righteous human Shepard, my edge is gone.”

“Your so-called edge consisted of coarse abrasive,” came the snarky rejoinder. “These days, you’re a much more pleasant person to be around.” She leaned in, gently placing her mouth against soft lips, which happily responded. Pulling back to take a breath, she resorted to pleading with her boss. “Contact the Broker, Aria. I feel sure he will be able to point you to a trustworthy merc team … a team that can capture Sederis and eliminate Eclipse from Illium.”

Once again, Aria stood absolutely still as she thought about her security chief’s request. After several moments, she sighed. “Okay, Nyreen. I’ll contact Jipaw Zilorno … have him set up a call to the Broker for me.”

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

“Okay, Traynor … let’s have it.” The general and I had retreated to one of several small rooms in the enormous house and were sitting across from each other at a small table.

I clasped my hands together on the polished surface in front of me, saying, “RaeLee, I won’t attempt to tell you how to proceed regarding Garrus’s requests, but …”

“Requests? … you mean demands, don’t you?” she interrupted. “I’m not privy to the financial health of the Systems Alliance, Sammy, but I have serious doubts about our ability to survive a
payout of that magnitude."

With a grimace, I continued, “… but, I strongly suggest you tell him you’ll take the matter under
advisement. Cerberus spent over three decades bending the Alliance to do its will. They paid
small fortunes to numerous people during that time. This conference is strictly off the record …
that’s the reason we’re having it here at the T’Soni estate.”

General Park was not happy. “Then how in hell did he come up with those numbers, Sammy. He
must have some information concerning that ship … its value in 2182, the cost to business for the
manufacturer. He didn’t just pull those numbers out of his ass hoping we’d acquiesce, did he?”

With a chuckle, I replied, “Garrus Vakarian is the chief advisor to their Primarch, General. He’s
not some stupid politician trying to dazzle you with bullshit … I believe he knows exactly what that
ship was worth and how much compensation each of those families should receive from the
Systems Alliance, for what was, in reality, a terrorist act perpetrated by an agent working for
Cerberus.” I looked straight into her eyes; without flinching, I said, “Ultimately, the Alliance was
complicit in that ship’s destruction, but Cerberus was responsible for it … Cerberus should have to
pay the penalty.”

Her mouth fell open at that. “Just how do you propose we bill them for this, Sammy? The Illusive
Man is long since dead … his organization scattered to the solar winds, galaxy-wide.”

“Credits still exist, in various financial institutions across the galaxy; some are being utilized even
today, by shell corporations that continue to operate as if Harper still sits on their boards.” I
handed her the datapad I’d been fiddling with, saying, “Haribon Military Industries, Cord-Hislop
Aerospace, CDR Holdings, New Dawn Pharmaceuticals … there was even a bank purchased on
Terra Nova.”

A hopeful expression flitted across General Park’s face as she studied the information on the
datapad. “Do you believe there’s a chance we can get at whatever credits Jack Harper had stashed
away among those organizations?”

“I do. Certainly no harm in looking … see what’s being hidden.”

“Okay … let’s go back out there. I’ll talk to Garrus, see how much time he’ll give me.”

“I need to speak with him first, in private,” I said. “Let’s go find him.”

I was sitting in the same chair as before, only now there was a turian with a terribly scarred face
seated across from me. “General Park was a bit surprised by the amount of credits you’re
demanding from the Alliance, Garrus. I must confess to being a bit baffled myself. How in hell
could you know an exact figure for each of the aggrieved parties when you only just learned of
this?”

“Shepard told me why I was being asked to travel here, so I did a bit of research during the trip;
each amount is based on an increase in value for each year since that ship was destroyed.” With a
flanging, sub-harmonic chortle, he added, “I’ll admit to you, it’s a negotiating tactic … set the bar
high so we can come to a satisfactory agreement somewhere in the middle.” He focused brilliant
blue eyes on me as he asked, “And really, why would you even care if the Alliance goes down the
financial shitter, Sammy? Didn’t they treat you like shit your entire career?”

“Really?” He actually drew back slightly at the change in my facial expression. “How I was
treated during my time in the Navy is not what we’re here to discuss, Garrus.” I lowered the timbre
of my voice as I angrily stared at him. “And this meeting isn’t about bankrupting the Alliance for the destruction of one goddamned ship, either. I’ve been sitting on this fucking information since 2182! The only thing compelling me to inform you of this is my desire to see Admiral Fletcher earn the condemnation his actions would have garnered had he not taken the coward’s way out by eating a bullet. I just as easily could have suppressed this information until my own death!”

Garrus leaned back towards me and sighed. “I apologize, Samantha. You shared a bit of your Ø7 program history with me on our trip back from the edge of the galaxy. Apparently, you developed a plan to prevent the destruction of the Anixara, and this Admiral Fletcher put a stop to the mission before you could complete it.”

I slid the OSD I had recorded for Garrus across the table. “There’s the proof, Garrus. All of Fletcher’s comms with The Illusive Man … those relating to the Anixara are indexed so they’re easy to find.” I growled, “The final recording in there is of him speaking to the Arcturus Station CO, telling—no, virtually ordering him—to find a way to kill Michael Moser Lang and implicate me in his murder, after which I was supposed to die during their attempt to take me into custody.”

The turian flared his mandibles as his mouth dropped open for a moment. Recovering quickly, he said, “I wasn’t aware Cerberus—The Illusive Man in particular—wanted you dead, Sammy. Seems incredible just how wide their influence had spread.” He sighed heavily. “I guess I owe you a big thanks on behalf of the Hierarchy. And your General Park appears to be someone who cannot be swayed by credits, which is as rare now as it was then. If it hadn’t been for her assigning you this mission back then, the answers to the ship’s disappearance would have never been known, much less seen the light of day.”

“So, now that you have a few more facts, can we get back to negotiating a realistic settlement?”

Before I could rejoin Shepard, Garrus, and General Park, my omnitool lit up with an incoming text message from Iringù-Eßizkur. »The Shadow Broker has a comms call from Omega Station. Jipaw Zilorno is calling on behalf of Aria T’Loak. He will reconnect with her when you are ready to respond.«

I thanked her, then sent a quick text to Spectre Shepard as I changed direction and walked a bit faster. Griff must have placed some incoming calls in a forwarding queue, knowing there were some questions to which only I could provide intelligent answers.

In less than ten minutes I had reached Irin’s dull black form and ridden the null-gravity tube into her structure. I quickly donned my cloak and sat down as I silently commanded the special lights and vocal modulator to power up. I checked my image—displayed in the lower corner of the large monitor in front of me—then used a thought to have my omnitool reconnect with Zilorno on Omega. “This is the Shadow Broker.”

Appearing as nervous as he had during our previous interaction, he anxiously stated, “Shadow Broker … I will connect you with Aria T’Loak.”

“What does she need that you are unable … or incapable … of delivering, salarian?”

The already large eyes went even wider. “Please, Sir. She would not tell me why she needed to speak with you again so soon.” He dry-washed his hands as he waited for an explosion … one I chose to save for another time.

“Make the connection, Zilorno.” As I watched, the image cross-faded into a rather disgruntled looking asari that was not used to waiting … for anyone, or anything. “Aria T’Loak. What does
the pirate queen of Omega need from me today? Surely you haven’t discovered the info I sold you was lacking in any way?”

“Your information was—as always—exceedingly accurate and complete. What I need now is an accomplished and discrete extraction team for a job on Illium. My chief of station security suggested I contact you.”

“And why might Nyreen Kandros think I would be able to assist you in this matter?” I watched in amusement as one brow marking rose in surprise when I dropped Nyreen’s name.

Recovering quickly, she replied, “She suggested that an all-asari team would be better suited for a clandestine mission to Nos Aedelos. Obviously, the vast majority of the city’s population is asari; Kandros feels that a turian strike team would stand out like a bonfire on a dark night … an opinion with which I reluctantly find myself in total agreement. So, are you able to provide me with a team? … one that can deliver positive results?”

My mind was spinning furiously as Aria told me what she needed. Making sure my voice still sounded even, I replied, “Stand by while I consult my records.” Without waiting for an answer, I blanked the live feed and opened a file I’d recently received from Liara, in which she had given me the names of a number of mercenaries that worked for the Broker; of these, a number were asari. In less than thirty seconds, I had an answer for Omega’s queen; I resumed the live feed and told her, “Captain Roshida B’Sayle. She leads a five-member team of exceptional skill … and discretion. I’ll place them on Omega … you provide transportation to Illium and back, plus backend technical support.”

“Weapons and armor?”

“They have all their own equipment.” I could see a bit of doubt creeping into her expression, so I said, “You called the Shadow Broker, T’Loak. There are more than a few highly trained teams I could assign, but none as likely to achieve success as B’Sayle and her commandos. Of course, if you’d rather take your chances with unknowns … or Tulana Varinian and her team of Talons …” I let the thought trail off as I watched her eyes widen slightly.

That I knew the name of Nyreen’s second on the station shouldn’t have surprised her, yet it did, and Aria did not like being surprised … I could hear it in her voice as she replied, “That you know so much about my station’s security chiefs does not make me happy, Shadow Broker … it makes me suspect you have spies among my people.”

“Nonsense! You make no effort to hide those turians, or their positions as your employees, and none of the Talons, despite possessing considerable biotic talents, are nearly as skilled in wet-work as these six asari.”

How much will this team cost me, Shadow Broker? My pockets are not exceedingly deep, particularly after paying you for the location of Sederis!”

I countered with a question of my own. “How much longer can Omega afford the continued decline in the wholesale price of refined Eezo, Aria T’Loak? Jona Sederis is selling illegally obtained product—mostly at your expense—and laughing all the way to the bank.”

I could envision the wheels turning as she thought about what I had said. The doubts in her expression transformed into steely resolve in a heartbeat. “Send them. Have B’Sayle contact Varinian when they arrive, but do it quietly. My participation in this little exercise must remain undisclosed, is that understood?”
“Perfectly. I’ll make the call.”

♦ AT LARGE, CHARLIE WARD · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM ♦

Roshida B’Sayle had just completed her late-morning workout and was walking to her quarters when her omnitool activated; of some surprise, the origin code displayed the unmistakable logo of the Shadow Broker. Haven’t heard from that bastard in quite some time … there must be a shit-storm in need of a boot up its ass if the Broker is calling me. She detoured to the small comms compartment, rechecked the origin of the caller just to be sure, then punched the ACCEPT control. “Shadow Broker?”

“Captain B’Sayle. I have a contract for you and your team; location is Illium, Nos Aedelos. You will first travel to Omega Station; once there, contact Tulana Varinian … she’s the lieutenant for the station’s security chief and Talons’ leader, Nyreen Kandros. Varinian will be in charge of getting you to Illium and providing last minute mission requirements.”

“Did the Talons research this assignment?”

“Information I provided to them will be provided to you as well. Varinian did not feel comfortable leading a turian team into a city with a majority asari population … an opinion with which I find I am in agreement.” The Broker paused, then added, “Once there, you will be entirely on your own. The primary target is Jona Sederis; secondary targets are Eclipse members in the city … all of them. Eclipse should be terminated with extreme prejudice.”

“Does your omission of a certain asari’s name mean that this exercise is not sanctioned?”

“No. That person is the petitioner; with the exception of providing round-trip transportation for your team, they prefer to have no outward involvement.” The Broker paused to transmit the research on Sederis, Eclipse and the amounts of pilfered Eezo, along with the estimated credits the crazed asari had been paid for the stolen resource. “I just passed on all the data collected on this matter. Take time to study it all … even the smallest detail may prove critical to your success.”

The Sentinel cocked her head. “If I agree to take this mission, when do we leave for Omega?”

“The Harashi is docked and awaiting your arrival.”

B’Sayle grinned as she snarked, “You must be pretty damned sure we’ll accept this job.”

“You are currently between assignments, Captain. This is an opportunity for you and your team to take on a mission while maintaining your anonymity … your independence … from Shadow Broker operations. There is a distinct advantage to preventing the total collapse of the Eezo market galaxy-wide, and this will help preserve your mercenary reputation. I believe it will ultimately prove beneficial to us both, in addition to our … unnamed client.”

Roshida shook her head slightly, then huffed and replied, “We’ll grab our gear and leave.”

“Excellent, Captain. I’ll inform Nyreen and Tulana.”

A double-rap of knuckles on the door frame and a “Captain?” brought Roshida’s head up to look at her Lieutenant. With a slight smile, she replied, “Come on in, Celia. You may as well start getting your gear ready for deployment.”

Lieutenant Celia M’Creno had seen the equipment list and already had some questions. “I know
we’re going to Omega Station, and will be flying on to Nos Aedelos from there, but …” she trailed off, perhaps hoping her captain would interrupt her; when she remained silent, the adept continued, “… but, the specified targets are asari, Captain. Do we really need all the additional hardware to take down a few Eclipse mercenaries? Won’t biotics suffice?”

“Normally, I’d say yes … but we’re six against forty-five or fifty or so. My instructions are to terminate every Eclipse sister in that city; the weapons will make that a lot easier, especially as they will assuredly be armed with pistols and assault rifles.” Roshida grasped her lieutenant’s upper arm. “Any of us being injured or killed on this mission is not acceptable, Celia.”

“Understood, Captain.” She moved to the weapons lockers and retrieved her M9 Tempest submachine gun, inspected the heat-sink ejection mechanism by cycling it twice, then tucked it in her kit bag along with a number of spare heat sinks. She also stashed a number of energy bars, Eezo-enhanced water rations and several containers of medi-gel.

She interestingly watched as the huntresses, Catalina T’Gelvos and Condella Selani, each added a slender, long-bladed asari-made sword to their own packs. She had rarely witnessed either one use those blades, but when they did, it was poetry in motion as they charged towards a target with biotics enhanced speed and used that power to swing their special blades. Celia had also witnessed the gruesome results of a few of those blade attacks … amputations, or decapitations, depending on where the strike landed.

Their huntress/infiltrator, Erinna Thyria, always traveled light, preferring to equip only an Acolyte pistol and an M-77 Paladin heavy pistol; she employed the former to strip shields and barriers from her opponents, while using the latter for its ability as an accurate, long-range heavy-hitter. Her biotics emphasized the use of Dark Channel to inflict heavy, continuous damage to an enemy at a distance, ensuring a greatly weakened enemy up close.

Their designated sniper, Joya S’Raxia, was quite tall and extremely well-muscled for an asari; she had spent a lot of time developing her upper body strength, to the point where she could effortlessly heft and accurately fire her massive Black Widow rifle. To prevent the weapon’s massive recoil from dislocating her shoulder every time she pulled the trigger, she wore customized leathers that featured shock-absorbing padding in the right shoulder area. She was also equipped with an augmented tactical cloak; while a bit power-hungry, it enabled a 40 percent increase in damage when the rifle was fired while the cloak was active. Celia had seen the results of some of Joy’s cloaked shots; all were less than attractive for whomever she targeted.

When everyone had packed their gear, the five team members gathered around B’Sayle for a preliminary briefing. “Our transport vessel for this stage is the Harashi… it’s parked nearby at the private space-dock awaiting our arrival. All of you have been with me long enough to know this, but I’ll say it anyway; do not arrive at that dock all grouped together. We’re going after Eclipse; they’re based on Omega, but I’m not so naive as to believe they do not have spies here that monitor ship traffic to that station.”

Celia asked, “Won’t our presence on Omega be noted?”

“Possibly, but we’ll only be there long enough to board the ship taking us to Illium. Once we’re in Nos Aedelos, I expect our presence may be a topic of some conversation, up until the time we drag Jona Sederis out of her lair.” Roshida looked at each member of her team as she asked, “Any other questions?” After a few moments of silence, she said, “Okay. Let’s get going.”
I drew Liara aside before returning to my meeting so I could inform her of what was about to happen on Illium. Thankfully, she agreed with my choice to deploy a wet work squad to deal with Aria’s problem. “Better to deal with it now, before Aria decides to become personally involved,” she whispered. “Jona Sederis is more than aware of the risks she’s taking by tweaking the queen’s nose. It’ll be a relief to have this Eezo piracy ended, but I worry that having Jona’s head on a spike outside of Omega will be like waving a red flag at a charging Krogan. The Eclipse are not likely to treat the insult as anything less than a declaration of war.” She paused to think about everything that was going to happen before simply concluding, “Best to merely do what she asks of you, Shadow Broker.”

I nodded. “She’s going out of her comfort zone by having the Talons stay close to home whilst allowing the Broker’s chosen hit team to do the dirty work.” I nodded as I said, “Be best for me to get back to it, Liara. I still need to visit T’Sere Shipyards while I’m here … inspect the *Rebekah*, learn how much the upgrades and repairs will cost.”

Liara nodded as she said, “My thoughts are with you, Samantha. I hope you can help work something out that will benefit the Turians without penalizing the Alliance too harshly. If it brings you some long overdue justice, that’s a plus. May the Goddess watch over you.”

It was late afternoon by the time we wrapped up our discussions concerning the destruction of the *Anixara*. RaeLee and Garrus had come to a tentative agreement regarding the amount of credits the hierarchy would accept as payment for the ship’s destruction with all souls on board.

All that was left for me now was a discussion with Shepard and the general concerning charges to be brought against the late Admiral Owen Fletcher and Commander Garrett Sutton. I handed a pair of OSDs to the Spectre, saying, “These have all the same information I gave to General Park … irrefutable proof of Sutton’s and Fletcher’s treasonous actions before and during the war.”

General Park weighed in with, “You are in a position to bring Sutton to heel, Spectre. Those recordings have been independently verified as unedited accounts of his conversations with Jack Harper, going back to before the war … before Sovereign, even. He was working for Harper prior to the completion and dedication of Arcturus Station in 2162.”

“I’ll look at their conversations tonight before bed, General. I’ll also need to consult with Admiral Hackett … make him aware of the shitstorm that’s bearing down on Alliance brass. I don’t think he’ll like it … hell, I believe he will absolutely hate it! … the man’s always been straight as they come. Finding out about all this crap in his own backyard? … hell, the Fifth Fleet was *based* in Arcturus, for Goddess sake!”

I nodded as I stood to go back to my room. “I truly wish you had been on Arcturus with me just before my reassignment to the *Normandy* SR-1 project, Rachaël. Sutton came within a whisker of losing his head.” Looking down at my calf-mounted húdié dāo, I added, “Only one that’s ever lost ‘is head by my hand was that fuckin’ roach inside Žiuk’Durmah. Sutton was lucky. Once these charges are filed and he’s sitting in a cell awaiting court-martial, he may wish I’d been a bit angrier.”

Shepard nodded without comment, and we each parted for a brief break before dinner was served.
Author’s Note: The description of the Rebekah borrows heavily from the depiction of an Asari Corvette by my favorite ME3 artist, Euderion. His visions of space vessels in the Mass Effect galaxy, as well as Star Trek, Star Wars, Stargate, Galactica, Babylon 5 and others can be found on the Deviant Art website at: https://www.deviantart.com/euderion/art

Be patient. Your voice will find its way into the world, not in one loud instance but a steady trickle that turns into a deluge. – Lang Leav, Love Looks Pretty on You

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Irīngû-Êbîzkûr’
Kaffe – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ OMEGA STATION · OMEGA NEBULA, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM ♦

Squad Leader Roshida B’Sayle hefted her shoulder bag, stepped through the open hatch of the Harashi and quickly glanced around the dark, dingy freighter berths in which the ship had docked. With a muttered, “Let’s move,” into her open comms mic, she proceeded to lead her companions to the nearby exit hatch.

Once all six of them were through and standing next to a broad walking path, populated by a few scattered batarians and a sprinkling of turians, she whispered, “Spread out, but stay in sight. I’ll contact the Talon, see where we have to go.”

Her companions began moving in a casual manner … Cat and Del moved to the right, Celia and Joy went left, while Erin stayed within a few meters of her captain. B’Sayle used her omnitool to send a message to Tulana Varinian informing her they had arrived and were awaiting directions to their next transport.

It quickly became apparent the Talons had eyes in many places on Omega—certainly to be expected, given who ruled the station—as a turian female, dressed in dull black armor with a small, white circle overlaid by a vertical red stripe supporting three red crossbars on her upper left chestplate silently approached Roshida, who quietly asked, “You Varinian?”

“I am. No need to ask who you are … you and your friends stick out like shining beacons of lethal violence down here. Come on … I’ll show you to your transport.”

B’Sayle fell into step beside the unobtrusive turian, asking as they walked towards a group of access hatches, “Do you have any more information for us? … anything additional to what we were told by our employer?”

Tulana produced an OSD from a thigh pocket and handed it to the asari. “This disk may have more … my captain handed it to me just before you docked … said to make sure I gave it to you before you boarded the transport.” Roshida silently pocketed the disk as they continued to walk. The turian continued in a quiet voice. “I need to tell you about one special requirement for this job, Captain.”
She came to a halt in front of an access hatch that looked no different than the others on either side. “The transport will remain docked in Nos Aedelos until you’re assignment is complete.” Tulana reduced the volume of her voice until it was barely a whisper, nearly lost in the flanging sub-harmonics. “Your primary target is to be returned here in the stasis container on board the transport. My boss wants a trophy … leaving that target behind is not an option.”

Hearing this made B’Sayle’s hackles go up, and in spite of herself, her entire body was momentarily wreathed in a shifting, translucent blue glow. “Most people believe me when I tell them I’ve completed an assignment,” Roshida hissed through clenched teeth. “Why the fuck would your leader need a damned body brought back?”

“We question neither instructions nor motives, Captain. It makes all our lives easier.”

Roshida B’Sayle had learned at a young age that arguing with the messenger was an exercise in futility. With a heavy sigh, she motioned to the hatch in front of where they were standing and asked, “Transport through here?

“The Desorspar is docked at the end of this passageway. It’s a bit small, but it sleeps eight, so I expect it will serve your needs quite adequately.”

Copper-flecked violet eyes studied the turian’s opalescent-greens. A heavy sigh, then, “Okay. We’ll contact you when we’re on our way back.”

“It’s been requested that you send regular progress reports.”

Roshida shook her head. “Not going to happen, and attempts to contact us will not be successful, understand? We’re the best at what we do because I won’t allow a client to micro-manage our contracts. You will be notified when we leave the planet to return here … not before.”

Tulana looked as if she was preparing to argue the point, but quickly decided that pursuing it wouldn’t be wise; with a nod of her head, she entered a code in her omnitool to unlock the hatch. “Safe travels, Captain B’Sayle. May the Spirits protect you and your team.”

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

Rather than return to my room after dinner, I had reentered Iringù-Eßizkur to check my messages. On the Shadow Broker side, there were only two; one from Roshida B’Sayle confirming her arrival on Omega and subsequent departure for Illium, and another from Zus’kann Solban telling of his success in tracking down a number of former researchers. The salarian said he’d bring them together on the Citadel, with the expectation the Broker would transport them to wherever they needed to go.

There was only one personal message waiting for me … I was delighted to see it was from Oriana Lawson. After checking local time on Eden Prime, I placed a return call, hoping I wasn’t too late. When the connection completed, I greeted her as her image resolved itself on my monitor. “Oriana! I’m glad you called me! What news do you have for me?”

She gave me a smile with her reply. “I’ll be needing a ride, Sammy, if it’s not too much trouble. I want to come work for you—on a trial basis—for six months. I believe I can accomplish a lot in that amount of time, but I feel I need the option of being able to walk away if being cooped up inside a tin can becomes too onerous for me to endure.”

I attempted to keep my disappointment at her time limit from showing on my face or in my voice.
“I’m glad you’re willing to give me a chance, Ori. When will you be ready to leave Eden Prime?”

“Three days. I don’t have much to bring with me … just clothes and some personal things. My apartment here is furnished, so nothing big or heavy to move.” Her brows knit together as she thought about furniture. “You never said. Is there a bed and a place for my clothes?”

“Of course there is. You’ll have private quarters, including a small lounge area with a viewport.” With a slight frown, I added, “We would like to initiate a slow, longitudinal rotation of the station, just so the view outside would be constantly changing. Unfortunately, practicality dictates we maintain a constant attitude in order to keep our sails—our solar collectors—directed towards the sun. A static view of the stars isn’t as interesting as watching the blue-shifted light-show outside an FTL starship, but it’s all I can offer … for the time being.” I smiled while concluding, “And actually, the timing will be perfect. I’m currently attending to some business on Thessia. I’ll be departing day after tomorrow local time, so I’ll swing through Utopia on my way back to the Nebula.”

“Sounds perfect, Sammy. Do stay in touch during your trip … I’ll be ready to leave with you as soon as you touch down.”

“Thanks, Ori. I’ll talk to you soon.” I terminated the connection and sat back in my chair as I thought about Lawson and the new research people coming on board. Looks like things are finally beginning to come together. With the additional people on the station, I’ll have to see what can be done to improve the environment … perhaps some plant life. Griff should be able to see to that. While it was on my mind, I composed and sent a text to Buchanan asking him to begin checking into creating a hydroponics area … one on our own deck, and one on the station’s newly redesignated deck two.

Knowing my presence would be missed if I slept within Iringü-EBizkur, I returned to the ground beneath her and strolled back to the main house. It was late enough in the evening that there was not much activity; seeing only a few commandos, I climbed the stairs to the second floor and went to my assigned room, there to take a quick shower before climbing into a bed that seemed as big as some small countries.

I rose early, got dressed in my crop top and shorts, then placed a few items in a small bag and made my way down to the commando’s exercise room. Other than a couple of ‘good mornings’ to the few asari in the space, I ignored them as I began my Tai Chi movements; I noticed a couple of them watching from the sidelines and whispering to each other as I finished my third rep of the series. Nothing unusual … Xiulin and I had regularly drawn an appreciative audience on board the Ionsai during our time on the asari corvette.

I had decided to omit the blades from my physical training regime today; there were a pair of heavy exercise machines, similar to the one I had obtained for our own exercise compartment on Ahn’Kahar Station. After I went for a fifteen-minute jog around the room, I sat at one of the machines and did a set of leg presses, followed by a full set of lying leg curls. Wide-grip lat pulldowns came next, followed with a set of butterflies. I finished the series with a set of triceps pushdowns, machine biceps curls and machine shoulder presses.

Soaking wet in sweat, I grabbed my bag and went back to my suite, there to take a lukewarm shower before donning my clothes and strolling back downstairs to have breakfast. Once I had a tray of food and a mug of Kaffe, I took a seat at the end of the closest table and began eating. In short order I was joined by General Park, who greeted me with a smile. “Almost missed seeing you, Sammy. You’re a bit late arriving.”
“Actually been up for nearly two hours, RaeLee. Did my exercises, then took a shower and changed. I’m going to borrow a shuttle for a flight to Dassus … need to visit T’Sere Shipwrights for a meeting concerning repairs and upgrades for the patrol craft I inherited.”

This was met with a look of surprise. “I wasn’t aware you owned a vessel, Sammy. If I may ask, how long have you had it? Are you planning to fly it back to Earth?”

I chuckled. “It’s a 25-year old asari patrol craft—the Rebekah—long retired and needing a lot of attention. When I discovered it, it had been in storage for at least ten of its 25 years. T’Sere most likely built it as the class leader for a series of patrol craft the asari military used before the war. I need to speak with their engineers about needed modifications and repairs, plus upgrades to the latest in nav-aids and crew amenities.” I took a sip of Kaffe from my mug as I concluded, “It won’t be flying again until I’m sure it’s as reliable as a newly-constructed vessel.”

Park’s expression indicated a bit of disappointment. “Too bad. I would have enjoyed a ride back to Vancouver in a two-decades old ship …” she chuckled wryly, “… rather than in a machine that’s several millennia old.”

“I’m hoping it will have a bit more room inside than Spirit’s Rage … won’t know until I see it in dry-dock.” Park actually laughed at my mention of the turian corvette Buchanan and I had used during our assignment to discover how Cerberus intended to destroy the Anixara. “It was adequate for our needs back then, but Griff wasn’t happy with the lack of privacy inside. I’m hoping the Rebekah will be a bit larger.”

Park laughed again. “Nude asari all look alike … I expect the Rebekah will disappoint you in that regard. Having separate facilities for the privacy of men and women on board a warship doesn’t concern them.”

I laughed at her ‘take’ on mixed gender personnel serving together in the confines of a space vessel. “Griff actually looks embarrassed any time he sees me in my exercise outfit … he’d most likely have a heart attack if he ever caught sight of me totally nude. We always refrain from wandering around our common areas in the buff.” I had a thought and voiced it aloud. “Maybe I ought to show him what I look like in just my skin … clear up the mystery for him.”

Ignoring my last statement and seeing that I had finished eating, she stood as I rose to take my tray to the collection station, saying, “I’ll be meeting with Spectre Shepard and Garrus this morning in order to further discuss the methods we’ll use to take Garrett Sutton down for treason. Still don’t know how Shepard plans on springing all this on Admiral Hackett … should be an interesting conversation.”

“I don’t envy her that task, RaeLee. I suppose telling the admiral uncomfortable truths can’t be avoided, and I want to see Sutton pay for his treasonous dealings with Cerberus; just wish I could see his face when he’s convicted. By the way, have you had any success at compiling a list of Sutton’s enemies?”

She frowned for a moment, then cocked her head slightly as she looked at me. “It’s not complete, Sammy, but I do have one started. Need to add a couple more people before I let you have it.”

“Okay then. I’ll see you when I return from Dassus this afternoon.”

♦ T’SERE SHIPWRIGHTS, DASSUS REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

Operations Director—and company owner—Matriarch Tralis met me as I stepped out of the T’Soni
shuttlecraft. “Samantha Traynor … it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She held her hands out palms upwards; I gently placed my open palms on hers as I replied, “As I am honored to finally meet you in person, Matriarch. Please, call me Sammy … or Sam.”

“Welcome to T’Sere Shipwrights … Sammy. If you will accompany me, I’ll give you a brief tour of our facilities before we take a look at the Rebekah.”

“Sounds good, Ma’am. Lead the way.”

Subsequent to being shown where their designs were finalized on immensely powerful computers, Tralis led me through the fabrication and assembly area on an enclosed, overhead walkway. “We’re usually working on at least four ships—all in various stages of completion—at any one time. The really large companies crank them out on an assembly line. That’s not us. T’Sere prefers to build quality space vessels, so our yearly output is much lower in comparison.”

After spending a few minutes watching a number of technicians working on one ship, I observed, “All your assembly people are asari … do you employ any of the other races?”

“For final assembly? No, we do not. We do employ some salarians in structural design, and a few former Systems Alliance affiliated humans as propulsion and defensive weapons designers, but the majority of our workforce are asari. That’s not from any conscious desire to exclude those who may wish to relocate here for employment … we simply have very few non-asari job applicants.”

Tralis smiled as she continued, “You must understand, T’Sere rarely introduces new designs … demand for our products has always been high, especially since the end of the war.” We stepped into an elevator, which took us down to ground level. As the doors parted, an elegant wave of her hand accompanied her next few words. “We have arrived at the reason for your visit.”

She led me onto a wide, raised walkway that formed a U-shape around an elegant looking relic from the pre-war era of asari space travel. “Is that disappointment I detect in your expression?”

I looked at her briefly, then returned my gaze to what could only be the Rebekah. The ship resembled a sculpture in jet black and midnight blue metal, complete with the gaping, forward facing ‘mouth’ reminiscent of a manta ray, a creature that lived in the subtropical and tropical oceans of Earth. “No. I’m actually surprised at how lovely a 25-year old ship … especially one that’s capable of FTL flight … appears after sitting in storage for ten or more years. Is it? …”

“One of ours?” she finished for me. “It is, and I’m proud to say it was the class leader for our entire run of 45 patrol craft of this design.” She continued to speak as we strolled around the ship. “The design is the forerunner to that of an Oseros-class corvette, but smaller … 155 meters long, 138 wide. When new, it was capable of 16.4 million Km/sec for short bursts … normal FTL cruise speed was nearly 51 times light speed … about 50.7 billion Km/hour.”

I did some calculations in my head. “Pretty impressive for 25-year old tech,” I said.

The Matriarch preceded her next statement with a throaty chuckle. “Try 29 years, Sammy. Our builder’s plate is affixed to the bulkhead behind you …” she indicated by inclining her head in that direction, “… just to the left of the hatch. The Rebekah was launched on 13 June, 2160 … saw active duty as a patrol craft in the Parnitha System and Athena Nebula until its decommissioning and sale in late 2175.”

I asked with a nervous chuckle, “Do you know who purchased it?”
Tralis entered a few commands into her omnitool; after a moment, it responded with a name. “Shade Microsystems Limited. Small company, based on the Citadel. Closed down after the geth attack in 2183, but the ship had been in storage since 2179 or so.”

“Shade Microsystems? Sounds like a data processing outfit.” I almost said aloud what I was thinking. Wonder why the Broker would even need a fifteen-year old patrol craft.

Walking up to the starboard airlock hatch, she opened it, waved me in ahead of her and said, “Possibly. Lots of small companies with big plans and not enough creds opened and closed in the seventies.” She led me through a corridor to the flight deck. “Take a look around, Sammy. The ship appears to have been well maintained … no signs of abuse while in private hands.”

I gazed around at the various control stations in the compact area—flight controls, navigation, propulsion, weapons, environmental—as she continued speaking.

“Navigation and flight controls are where we’d be able to do the most good for you, Sammy. Integral VI controls can be installed quite easily … enabling one trained person the ability to navigate and fly this ship.”

“Weapons?”

“The offensive weaponry was removed before it went into private ownership. Defensively, it can still pack a good punch, and installing nearly thirty years of improvements to its defensive weapons suite, including the latest in stealth technology, would make it nearly untouchable.”

She smiled as I nodded my head and replied, “The best offense is always an overwhelming defense. How about propulsion and the drive core? I can’t imagine upgrading that will be anything but expensive.”

She sat in what I presumed to be the pilots’ chair. “Spectre Shepard and Lady Liara have made some unusual friends. The turians granted us a license to build and install … and retrofit … Tantalus drive cores in the ships we manufacture … or rebuild, such as the Rebekah. In turn, the asari government has licensed the use of Silaris hull armor to those interested in such … the turians can’t retrofit their warships fast enough.”

I nodded as I thought about all she had told me. “May I see the rest of the ship? I’m particularly interested in crew accommodations.”

“Certainly, Ms Traynor. Please, follow me.”

♦

NOS AEDELOS, ILLIUM · TASALE SYSTEM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

Roshida B’Sayle stepped out of the Desorspar and paused to study the area around her … that is, the little bit she could see. Unlike Omega and the Citadel, this place actually experienced day / night cycles, and it was the middle of the night here in Nos Aedelos.

Feeling a bump against her left shoulder, she turned to her lieutenant and whispered, “Sunrise in about ten hours, Celia. Let’s get our asses out of sight. I don’t like the itchy feeling in the small of my back. Eclipse is here … I can feel it.”

Although Roshida couldn’t see her, Celia nodded, hefted one of her two travel packs and began sauntering towards the customs check-in area. Roshida turned and walked towards the Desorspar’s stern; once hidden by the shadows obscuring that portion of the docks, she activated her tactical cloak. Effectively invisible, she quietly moved back towards the ship’s nose; here she
picked up Celia’s other travel bag and tucked it up under her long leather duster.

There was a 4.5 meter high energy barrier separating the docking platform from the rest of the city, placed so as to force all arriving passengers to submit to customs inspections. It wasn’t intended to stop a determined person from going over it in order to bypass customs, but was there to keep honest people honest; B’Sayle wasn’t honest, and had no intention of having her weapons and specialized equipment confiscated by the authorities. The area near this section of the barrier was partially hidden in shadows, perfect for her next action.

Using a mass reduction generator to negate her weight, she jumped straight up 5 meters and used her gloved hands to grab onto the top of one of the narrow, upright generators between which the energy barrier curtain was energized. Once she’d made a quick inspection of the other side, she deftly swung her legs over and lightly dropped to the surface. After quickly stashing Celia’s bag, along with her own, she returned to the docks side of the barrier in the same manner. In the meantime, Catalina and Erinna had each made a similar trip over the barrier and returned.

The team’s weapons and other equipment were all safely stashed away from the prying eyes of customs inspectors, and Celia, already through the inspection with her shoulder bag of traveling clothes, had walked along the path and secured the six travel bags in order to keep everything safe until the rest of the team cleared customs, something they absolutely needed to do in order to keep the port authorities from initiating a search for six passengers missing from the *Desorspar*.

In less than 55 minutes, the entire squad—all protected from prying eyes by tactical cloaks—was moving towards their first goal … places where they could stay and meet unobserved.

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**T’SERE SHIPWRIGHTS, DASSUS REPUBLIC · THESSIA**

After thoroughly inspecting the *Rebekah*, I accompanied Matriarch Tralis to a small luncheon facility near her offices. As we enjoyed a leisurely meal, accompanied by a small glass of Elasa each, she spoke of what T’Sere would be able to accomplish over the next four-to-seven weeks.

“Retrofitting the propulsion system will, of course, consume the most time … and credits, but the new drive core, accompanying heat sinks and new fusion reactor will grant the *Rebekah* a major advantage over ships her own size, and larger … as large as a turian or Alliance frigate. Its defensive systems and weaponry will be updated; we’ll install the latest salarian-designed GARDIAN anti-missile and anti-fighter laser turrets … these will utilize near-ultraviolet frequencies, with seven times the range of the best infrared lasers.”

After pausing to take a bite or two of cheese—I believed it was Uloth—she continued. “We’ll also fit multicore shielding to the hull after installing our Silaris armor plating.”

“Won’t that make the ship a lot heavier?” I asked, before taking a sip of Elasa.

“It *will,*” came the thoughtful reply, “but the new ME core will more than make up for the slightly greater weight penalty. Additionally, we’ll install improved maneuvering thruster modules. By the time our engineers have completed all the installations and upgrades, you’ll have a ship with the power-to-weight ratio and maneuverability of a fighter craft.”

I finished my Elasa and said, “We haven’t spoken of crew facilities. We’ll need partitions in the lavs and showers on the crew decks. My usual traveling companion is a human male—Griffen Buchanan—who breaks out in an embarrassed sweat anytime there’s a possibility one of us might see the other without any clothes, or using the toilet.”
Tralis grinned. “I’ve often heard that humans are extremely shy where it concerns nudity … their own and others.” Taking the last sip of Elasa from her glass, she set it on the table and picked up her datapad. “Are you sure this needs to be done, Sammy? It’s something an asari would never consider.”

She appeared to be joking, but I responded anyway. “Even with partitions, he’ll have a difficult time. He’d prefer a solid, sound-proofed tiled wall between the restrooms. I don’t much care one way or the other, but most men seem to have a real hang-up with women seeing their genitals in any setting outside of their bedrooms. Having a thin partition between the male and female areas of the facilities will be something he’ll just have to get used to.” I didn’t mention that I had once seen Griff’s genitals up close and personal; that fact still caused his cheeks to flush anytime I mentioned it.

Tralis laughed aloud. “I’ve been alive for centuries, Sammy, and I learn something new every time I speak with a human, of either gender. We’ll fix the restrooms and shower areas for you.”

“One other thing … on the side you choose to designate for the males? I’d like you to install at least one of these … two would be better, if there’s enough space.” I used my omnitool to send a picture of a wall-mount urinal to her omnitool. “Since men generally pee standing up, one of these installed in the men’s lav will make things a lot easier … and possibly less messier.”

She looked at the photo, looked at me, then looked back to the photo. Her only comment was, “That must be really convenient when one is in a real hurry … or has to go really, really bad!”

I chuckled. “Tell me about it. It’s one of the reasons there are at least twice as many toilets in women’s lavs—human lavs, anyway—in places such as transport hubs and sports complexes.”

She rose to take her tray to the collection stand. “Okay, Ms Traynor … we’ll get started on the Rebekah. I’ll send a detailed estimate for expenses as soon as I have it worked up.”

“Thank you, Matriarch. We followed Spectre Shepard’s recommendation in bringing the Rebekah to T’Sere; after meeting you and touring your facility, I’m more than convinced it was the correct choice. I appreciate you taking the time from your busy schedule to meet with me.”

“You are most welcome, Sammy. It has been my pleasure to speak with you today.” We had walked to the exit from which I could walk back to my shuttle; turning to face her, I raised my hands waist high. She set her palms on mine as she said, “Go with the Goddess, Samantha Traynor.” After we parted, I could sense her eyes on my back as I walked to the shuttle. Not every day she sees a human, and I bet having a human visitor with credits to spend is even rarer.

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

I had finished enjoying a relaxed dinner with Shepard, Liara, General Park and Garrus, along with the several commandos that always seemed to be hovering nearby wherever T’Soni and Shepard happened to be. Shepard paused to grip my shoulders and whisper in my ear as she passed me to leave the dining room. “Come find me in the study before you retire for the evening, Samantha.”

The hands gave a gentle squeeze before trailing down across my back as she walked away.

After leaving the dining room, I went outside and rode the null-grav tube up to Iringù-Eßizkur’s habitat compartment, where I placed a call to Buchanan. “How are things going, Griff?”

He showed his teeth in a huge grin. “Couldn’t be better Sammy. I had already been thinking about a hydroponics garden when your text arrived, so did some investigating … found someone
“a couple, actually, that will obtain and set up everything we need.”

“Who did you say owned the station?”

With a chuckle, he replied, “I didn’t … just told ’em the owner was a brilliant, but eccentric former advisor to the Systems Alliance that preferred anonymity.”

“And they bought that?” I asked with a bit of incredulity.

Looking wounded for a moment, Griff replied, “I’ve gotten really good at tellin’ lies, Sammy. Some might even say I am an expert at shoveling bullshit!” After a hearty laugh, he cocked his head slightly and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level. “The really neat thing about this pair, Sammy? They designed and installed the hydroponics systems and plant life on the Nexus, and on ark Hyperion before their departures for the Andromeda Galaxy.”

My mouth fell open in surprise at his revelation. “That’s … just incredible, Griff! I wonder why they didn’t make the trip themselves.”

“Don’t really know, Sammy. I asked, and immediately got the impression they didn’t wish to talk about it. I guess it takes a special kind of crazy to go into cryosleep for a 600-year, one-way trip to an unexplored galaxy … my suspicion is they simply got cold feet at the last minute.”

“Have you met them? More importantly, do you trust them?”

“They’re working down on deck three—our newly designated deck two—they needed to see the space available before a system could be designed. And I do trust them – hell, Zus’kann Solban even vouched for them.” He paused, as if remembering something. “By the way, Solban wants the Broker to get in touch with him … says he has eight former researchers just waiting for transportation. They want to work for us … well, the Shadow Broker. ‘Want me to go pick them up?’”

I thought about it for a few moments before answering, “I’ll contact him as the Broker, tell him I’ll send an agent—that would be you—to transport him and his researchers. They can go to work as soon as they’re aboard and settled in. I’ll be bringing Oriana Lawson with me when I return tomorrow. Is Cordell Webb still aboard?”

“He is … he’s supervising our new gardeners in addition to his own crew.”

“I’ll send you a text as soon as I finish speaking with Solban. Chinami can do her work without supervision, and Mr Webb doesn’t really need to know you’re gone. Take the second shuttle … it still has all its seats. Shouldn’t be more than a few hours out and back.”

“Okay, Sammy. I’ll get ready to leave while you talk to the salarian. Let me know where I need to go when you text me back.”

As soon as I finished speaking with Zus’kann Solban, I texted Griff with the salarian’s location on the Citadel. Having two people that could assume the identity of the Shadow Broker was a real plus, one that we were increasingly using to our advantage.

Griff assured me he would leave right away, in order to have everyone back to the station in time for a late dinner. After checking for messages and my data feeds, I used Irin’s null-grav tube to descend back to the surface; once there, I strolled through the gathering dusk back to the house, entered, and found my way to Shepard’s comfortable study, where I discovered her to be sitting in front of a low fire, sipping from a crystal tumbler.
She raised her glass towards me as I entered. “Sammy … come … join me.” She poured a generous measure of what I learned was Bushmills 16 Irish Whiskey into a tumbler that appeared to be a twin of the one from which she was drinking.

I took a sip and ran it around the inside of my mouth with my tongue before swallowing. I enjoyed the honeyed, nutty maltiness and toasted wood flavors, then enjoyed the burn as it slid down my throat. “You’re usually sipping Bushmills 21,” I said. “I know it’s a rare treat for you. What has you drinking 16?”

She chuckled as she motioned me to the empty chair next to hers. “The distiller’s entire production run of 16 and 21 sold out in less than four weeks this season; I consider myself lucky to have scored a case of the 16 -year old whiskey!” Another chuckle. “Am I to infer from you demeanor that all is okay on Ahn’Kahar Station?”

“We’re making good progress on the modifications. I have a quarian programming genius fixing what could have been fatal flaws in the environmental software, and we just hired a married couple to design and install a hydroponics garden on two decks.” I sipped from my glass, tipped my head back in satisfaction and sighed.

“I remember asking you if Harbinger would even allow a shooting war to begin between humans and turians. Did you get a response?”

“I did.” I turned my head to look directly into ocean green orbs. “Small, regional conflicts are completely beneath their notice, Rachaél. That said, a word from Spectre Shepard would be all Harbinger would require to intervene … against both sides.”

“From me? Really!? That seems incredible, Sammy.”

“Why should it? You are The Shepard. The Reaper War … their so-called harvest … ended because of your personal sacrifice.”

Shaking her head slightly in self-conscious denial, she tipped the rest of the contents from her glass into her mouth, grimaced slightly at the burn from the liquid sliding down her throat and leaned back in her chair to study the flickering embers in the fireplace. My next statement brought her head around instantly.

“Shepard, I feel I need to warn you … Garrett Sutton was able to survive the Reaper’s relocation of the Citadel to Earth orbit, and its subsequent return to the Widow System. I believe that points up the fact of how well he had fortified his offices and residence during his brief time on the station.” I gazed intently into her eyes as I concluded, “If Sutton has any warning … any warning at all … when you finally come for him, he may just dig in and resist.”

“Man like that … having screwed over so many people for so long, it would not surprise me to learn he managed to somehow create a panic room … maybe even an emergency exit.”

I nodded slowly as she spoke. After tipping the rest of my tumbler’s contents into my mouth, I swallowed as I thought about the snake that was Garrett Sutton. “Soon as I’m back inside Iringû-Ebízkur on my way home, I’ll begin researching that for you. Might be a bit more difficult than finding the Blue Suns’ hidden passageways, but if he has a backdoor, I’ll find it.”

Rachaél nodded. “That would be nice, Sammy. No telling how much crap that man could stir up if he was allowed to run free after being ousted from his cushy job.” Standing from her chair, she took my glass and set it on the table alongside hers. “I’m going to bed, Sammy. I’ll see you and General Park off in the morning after breakfast.”
Roshida B’Sayle, after a short walk back from the nearby café where she had enjoyed a quiet breakfast, had just entered the main lobby of the apartment building in which she was staying. Being in a bit of a hurry did not mean she was paying any less attention to her surroundings … her eyes were always moving, looking and taking notice of anything out of place, a person that didn’t belong, something that wasn’t as it had been when she left.

Infiltrator Erinna Thyria had joined her captain for breakfast; with her back towards the room full of early morning diners, she had covertly filled Roshida in on all she had discovered in the three days she’d been allowed to investigate the Eclipse sisters closest to Jona Sederis. “Suvanni D’Klan has been with Sederis the longest of any Eclipse sister; she’s not just her lieutenant, she’s her most trusted confidante. Her biotics are formidable … as they would need to be. Sederis would not have anyone less than a completely loyal master adept at her side.”

Roshida had chuckled as she asked, “So, no way we can buy her off?” Erin’s critical glance at her captain spoke volumes; B’Sayle held up her hands as she hastened to clarify. “A poorly, ill-conceived attempt at humor, Erin … obviously something I have not mastered.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, her facial expression dead serious. “What of the others? … her personal guard?”

The infiltrator did not smile as she replied, “A frontal assault on the warehouse Sederis calls home would most likely end with all of us severely injured … and most of us dead. Every sister employed by Sederis is willing to die to protect her; as Jona is unable to run at all … or even walk very far, her survival depends on their fanatical loyalty. We’ll need to eliminate every Goddess-be-damned Eclipse sister in that building to have any chance of grabbing Sederis.”

Roshida had listened intently to her infiltrator’s report; when Erinna stopped speaking, her captain said in a deathly quiet voice, “Get the team together, Erin. We have to get this operation done … the sooner, the better … for us … and the galaxy.”
Finality of Dangerous Choices

‘The Goddess is coming home to us; she brings wealth to our houses and hearts.’ This is how I see my sisters. Pure as fire, the greatest wealth I could ever know, finally, finally, bringing me home.
— Nikita Gill, Dragonhearts

**Irín** – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erín’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringū-Ebīzkur’

**Ø7** – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

♦ T’SONI COUNTRY ESTATE, ARMALI REPUBLIC · THESSIA ♦

I arose early in order to exercise, bathe, and perform a cursory inspection of my data feeds before breakfast; taking a quick look around the large dining hall, I spotted Garrus Vakarian enjoying his mealtime. Of some surprise, General Park was seated across from him, not allowing her own meal to interfere in the least with all she had to say to this big Turian.

I loaded a tray with various fruits and cheeses, then added something that looked and smelled like scrambled eggs. After pouring myself a large mug of Kaffe, I took my meal to the table occupied by General Park. Nudging the turian’s shoulder, I asked, “Mind if I join you?”

Crystal blue eyes looked up at me as he dropped his mandibles slightly and answered. “There you are … I was beginning to wonder if you would be having breakfast with us.”

I chuckled slightly as I responded, “I would have to be an invalid to miss a chance at having breakfast with you, Garrus! You’re my favorite turian!”

RaeLee spoke up, saying, “He wasn’t my favorite when I met him, Sammy, especially after our first meeting regarding the Anixara, but I have to say, in the short time I’ve known him, his charm has become obvious. It’s easy for me to see why he’s so highly regarded by everyone.”

Sitting next to him, I asked what the pair had been discussing, then began eating.

“The financial health of the Systems Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy,” RaeLee replied. With a quick glance at Garrus, she added, “Our economies have not recovered from all the destruction. That there is any progress being made in reconstruction on Palaven … or Earth … can only be attributed to assistance being provided by the Repositories.”

“Which is why receiving reparations for the loss of the Anixara is so important,” Garrus said. “The number of credits we receive is not as important as actually receiving them. The Primarch needs to know that humanity takes responsibility for their actions.”

“Even if that so-called humanity was a minority, humanocentrist group of people led by a man that espoused his point of view because of his treatment and the death of his friends at the hands of the Hierarchy?” I asked. The look of surprise on General Park’s face at my question was exactly what I wanted to see.

Turning my attention to Garrus, I clarified by adding, “The Illusive Man’s views on human superiority were not shared by humanity as a species, Garrus. Jack Harper turned a personal hatred
for turians into a rabid hatred of every other species in the galaxy, and he had a great deal of success in spreading his poisonous beliefs. It should not come as a surprise that he would condone collateral damage … deaths, even … to accomplish his goals.”

I continued to eat as I thought about the Anixara; thankfully, Garrus continued to eat as well. I could see I had made RaeLee uncomfortable with my declaration concerning Harper and Cerberus. I added, “It’s truly unfortunate for everyone that Admiral Fletcher’s gambling addiction was not treated as the disease it was; he propped up his lavish lifestyle with creds provided by the Illusive Man.”

General Park interjected, “And I’m going to push to have whatever remains of his estate returned to the Alliance as partial repayment for allowing himself to be so successfully blackmailed by Cerberus.” She paused to sip some of the tea from her mug, then added, “There’s also the matter of the forced, early termination of the Ø7 program, Sammy. At the very least, everyone that was part of that program deserves ‘correction to record’ actions. Current Service Members—like Captain Yuán—may even be eligible for some specialty back pay … possibly even a boost in grade, or at least time in service.”

“She just might welcome that, General … but it’s not something she has sought. Hell, I seriously doubt she would approve of what I’m trying to accomplish by meeting with you and Garrus.”

“She doesn’t know?” RaeLee chuckled as she realized what she’d asked. “Of course she doesn’t … how could she?” Shaking her head slightly, the general continued, “Just one of the many things I love and respect about that woman, Sammy … her integrity as an officer … and as a human being.”

I smiled as I listened to General Park. ‘That woman’ is the love of my life, for a great many reasons!

“Do you think the Alliance might wish to restart the program? … maybe reinstate those that were terminated from Ø7? Perhaps some would welcome the chance to return to their former jobs.”

Park held her hands up, saying, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Sammy. We still have to see what happens when Spectre Shepard presents all the evidence you’ve so painstakingly gathered.”

“Evidence I’m happy you uncovered, Samantha.” Garrus reached around behind me to grasp my upper arm and pull me slightly into his side. “To finally know the fate of the Anixara, even if the Hierarchy never sees a single credit for the loss, is something for which I cannot thank you enough. I know you had personal reasons for doing this, but … Spirits!” His arm across my back felt good … this turian had always been a solid anchor for me, ever since I met him in the skies over Menae during the early stages of the war.

“Thanks, Garrus. I just wish we had been allowed to save that ship, and to hell with what Jack Harper wanted.” I stared hard into a pair of caring eyes as I added, “I’ll be looking for ways to get at some of the credits the sonuvabitch had stashed around the galaxy. This isn’t over, by any means.”

He drew back minutely at the vehemence of my words. “If it was anyone else saying such, I’d have a hard time believing them.” He squeezed me slightly, dropped his arm and said, “Be careful out there, Samantha. Don’t get yourself hurt or killed over this … any of it.”

I looked at the general as I rose from the table. Picking up my empty tray and mug, I said, “We should be leaving, RaeLee. I have to meet someone on Eden Prime on my way back home.”

She downed the rest of her now lukewarm coffee, set the mug on the tray and rose from the table,
then picked up her tray as she nodded. “I’m ready to get back to Earth, Sammy. I’m sure there are people on that base out beating the bushes looking for me.”

I grinned with my reply. “I’ll meet you outside, then,” then placed my tray in the collection area.

I had barely seen Liara during my stay, having spent the majority of my time here in meetings with Spectre Shepard; as expected, Rachāël enveloped me in an embrace that seemed to belie our oftentimes turbulent past on the Normandy. She kissed my cheek as she released me and said, “I’m glad you chose to have your meeting here; I believe it accomplished a lot. It’s been a pleasurable experience. Fly safe, Samantha … and try not to stir up any more trouble out there, eh?”

I replied with a laugh. “No promises, but I’ll do my best, Spectre.”

I turned to Liara; taking her hands, I drew her close and whispered, “No matter the reason, being able to spend time here is like being on vacation. Thank you so much for allowing Garrus, the general and myself to invade your sanctuary for a couple of days.”

“It was our pleasure, Sammy.” After pausing briefly, she asked, “May I presume that you will keep us updated on everything going on in your life?”

“Of course, Liara. You may think this sounds strange coming from a human, but I give thanks to the Goddess each day for your continued support. Be well, Lady T’Soni.”

The momentary grimace at my use of her title was quickly replaced by a huge grin as she gathered me in her arms for an intimate embrace. She gave me a lingering kiss, every bit as passionate as the previous time she had bid me farewell; she pulled away only slightly, keeping me firmly in her arms and, with her lips so close to mine I could feel her breath, whispered, “You as well, Shadow Broker,” then released me—reluctantly, it seemed—and rejoined Shepard, who had just finished bidding farewell to General Park.

Garrus took the opportunity to step up in front of me; leaning down slightly, he carefully embraced me and said, “Stay safe out there, Sammy. I truly believe you are so much more than a simple data broker now, but your secret is safe with me.” He released me and made a quick entry on his omnitool; this caused mine to momentarily activate. “I just gave you my personal contact information … something I should have done when I left Iringū-Ébīzkur to return to Palaven. If you ever need turian assistance, of any kind, contact me directly. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

His eyes told me everything I needed to know about this turian. I reached a hand up and gently caressed a mandible as I replied, “Thank you so much, Garrus. Words are inadequate to express how much I value your friendship.”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head into my palm as I spoke; when I withdrew my hand, he opened his eyes and replied, “That goes both ways, Sammy. Spirits protect you.”

He turned and took the few steps necessary to rejoin Rachāël and Liara, prompting me to look at RaeLee. “Ready to go, General?”

She tilted her head back to look at the ‘face’ of the ultra-black construct that would be taking us home before answering, “No, but we should be off and on our way back. I guarantee there’s no one doing my work while I’m away, Sammy.”

I walked up to Irin’s null-gravity tube and waved her in. “After you.”

With a heavy sigh, she walked past me, stepped into the opening and disappeared. I waved at our hosts and followed her back into my guardian Repository. With both of us inside, Iringū-Ébīzkur
activated her massive eezo core and silently lifted off from the landing area.

I had contacted Oriana just before leaving Vancouver, after touching down long enough to see RaeLee Park back to her office. The general had hugged me while thanking me for arranging the meeting on Thessia … she was more than ready to see the Alliance drop the hammer on Lt. Commander Garrett Sutton and the late Admiral Owen Fletcher.

All this ran through my mind as I waited for Oriana Lawson to arrive from the city; Irin had set down at the edge of the spaceport, as instructed by the port authorities. I had explained to several people, each a bit higher in the command chain, that Irin was my personal spacecraft; none of them were convinced until I exited the null-gravity tube at her feet.

I was leaning against one of her massive claws with my arms crossed under my chest when the colonel in charge of the combined military/civilian spaceport came roaring up in a speeder. The man slowly climbed out of the X3M, looked up at Irin’s ‘face’ in fearful astonishment, then looked at me in stunned amazement. As I continued to lean on my support, he slowly walked up to me, stopped, then gulped as he finally found the words to ask me, “How in heaven’s name is it that you ride around inside this … this … ancient machine?”

I would have sworn I heard a heavy sigh from above me as I uncrossed my arms. I rubbed the claw on which I had just been leaning as I said, “She’s my friend, Colonel. Her name is Iringù-Eöffentlich, and she’s every bit as alive as you and me. She has chosen to provide me with transportation … and protection, for as long as I have need of her. For now, I would recommend that you have your defense system stand down. I seriously doubt anything you could fire at her is capable of disabling her, and she would certainly retaliate in her own defense … and mine.”

I saw another speeder heading towards us from the terminal building; the colonel activated his omnitool, entered a couple of command lines, then dropped his arms to his sides. The approaching speeder slowed as it drew near, then stopped a few meters from the colonel’s. I was glad to see the reason for my stopover climbing out of the machine; Oriana Lawson grabbed a couple of packs from the rear as the driver picked up another, and together they walked towards me. Oriana surprised me by walking right up to me while saying, “Damn, Traynor! You sure know how to ride around in style!”

I showed my teeth in a huge grin as the colonel and Ori’s driver both looked at us as if we had lost our minds. I took the bag the driver had brought, said, “Shall we be off?” and took the few steps needed to reach the null-gravity tube.

Ori grinned back … it looked to me as if she thought this was all a grand adventure … something I’m sure Miranda had done her best to shelter her sister from having. “Can’t wait, Sammy! What’s it like to fly around inside one of these?”

I nodded to the colonel and Ori’s driver, then turned and stepped into the translucent tube. She quickly followed, then let out a low whistle of surprise as she floated upwards below me. Inside the small reception compartment, I stepped aside as Oriana was gently impelled out of the tube, then set her packs down by the bulkhead and walked past the entry to the lounge.

She jumped as Irin welcomed her. >Lawson-Oriana. I am happy to meet you. As for flying around in a Repository—it what you think of as a Reaper—I believe it to be no different than traveling inside any small to mid-sized interstellar vessel.<
I grinned at the flustered woman as I responded to the greeting by saying, “You startled her, Irin.”

I walked back to where Ori had stopped in her tracks upon hearing Irin’s voice. “You didn’t hear my explanation to that dock manager, Ori. Iringù-Eßizkur is every bit as alive as you, or me. She’s an intelligent being … very much her own person, and unlike the many Repositories I’ve encountered since the end of the war, considers herself gender-feminine.”

Oriana had looked all around herself as she listened to my description of Irin, as if looking for the source of the feminine voice. Leveling her gaze at me, she replied, “I guess I never really gave the matter any real thought, Sammy.” Shaking her head slightly, she finally took a few steps towards me while concluding, “It surprises me that they speak! Stories I’ve been told … and seen … of the destruction during the early months of the invasion and war … the news vids all depicted them as simple, mindless weapons, intent on obliterating civilizations galaxy-wide!”

“I follow me … have a seat in the lounge. I’ll give you an abbreviated history lesson while Irin takes us home.” Quickly forming the words in my mind, I sent a text to my huge friend.

»Activate the view screens and let’s get going, Irin.«

I thought about the two men we’d left on the ground below and added, »Just, make sure anyone standing nearby won’t be affected by your liftoff.«

I motioned Oriana towards the chair closest to the entrance. I sat beside her and explained as the monitor came to life, the split image showing a view straight ‘down’ … soon to be a rearwards view, with the other half of the screen showing what was ahead of us. Lawson watched with great interest as the dual chronometers came to life with Irin’s liftoff from the planet’s surface.

I explained, “The upper chrono is destination ETA.” I felt the subtle shift of artificial gravity as Iringù-Eßizkur reoriented the apparent ‘down’ inside her structure to account for her attitude change into a weightless environment; I could tell that Ori felt it also. She looked at me, her expression of amazement obvious as she said, “No vibrations, no engine noise, no … anything!”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” I quipped. With a thought, I directed Irin to bypass the relay and set out across the void at close to her top speed. I looked at my guest and said, “We’re going to bypass the Utopia Relay and fly straight back to Ahn’Kahar Station. It’s really only a short distance—a hundred light years or so less than from Earth to Utopia, so about 1400—and Iringù-Eßizkur really enjoys the opportunity to stretch her legs, so to speak.”

The upper chronometer in the virtual viewport began incrementing downwards as Irin accelerated, finally settling on a mark of just under three hours. Oriana blurted out, “My God, Traynor! What’s the top speed of this bloody thing!?”

“She’s capable of a sustained velocity of 3.2 trillion kilometers a second, so just over eleven and-a-half quadrillion kilometers an hour. Of course, the ETA displayed will increase as we get close and Irin has to begin decelerating, but …” I laughed as I thought about it, “… when she begins braking for arrival, watching the speed numbers fall makes me think she’s tossed out an anchor or two … and her inertial dampeners are so efficient, you never feel it!”

With a shake of her head, she replied, “Miranda shared with me some of what Shepard discovered about them at the end of the war. And this … construct … Iringù-Eßizkur … is just a destroyer-class Reaper. Is it true the big ones, like Harbinger, are even faster? With that kind of speed, why did they need the relays?”

An ancient voice sounded through the compartment. »Repository, if you don’t mind, Lawson-Oriana.«

I retorted, “Irin’s a bit touchy about how people refer to them, Ori. Each one carries the
knowledge of civilizations they, um—harvested, to use their description—in the past, thus they think of themselves as Repositories … archives, if you will. A similar term would be libraries, I guess.”

I crossed a leg, ankle over thigh, as I continued, “The … intelligence, as it was called by Leviathan when it spoke with Shepard … had the Reapers create the mass relays in order to speed the time between cycles for greater efficiency. The really scary thing was the Citadel … they’d enter the Widow System from dark space and spread out from there. I think this last attempt, where they were forced to enter through Kite’s Nest, really slowed them down.”

“*The Citadel, being so close to the Widow Relay, increased our efficiency by a substantial amount.*” Iringù-Eßizkur explained. “*When we were forced to enter through the Harsa Relay instead of the Bahak Relay … destroyed by The Shepard … we first had to travel through Exodus before we could enter the Sol system.*”

Ori sat silent for a number of minutes as she processed all that had just been revealed. When she turned to look at me once again, it was to ask, “Do the Leviathans still live?”

“Unknown, but the probability is high. Harbinger assigned a number of destroyers to locating and gathering their artifacts, galaxy-wide; 2181 Despoina is quarantined and the planet is being monitored from a safe distance.” I shrugged. “It’s an ocean planet, and I can’t imagine anyone—from any race—purposely violating that quarantine.”

Returning her gaze to the monitor, Lawson fell silent for several moments, before standing from her chair. She stretched as she asked, “Anything to eat or drink in here?”

I stood and moved towards the dining area and its small kitchen. “Follow me. What would you like? There’s a small selection of beverages, but I’m afraid our food stocks are limited to frozen ‘heat’n’serve’ meals. The only time Iringù-Eßizkur was inhabited for any length of time was during Liara’s search for Cerberus-created clones of Shepard.”

“There was also Massani-Zaeed’s trip to Raheel-Leyya and back, Samantha.”

“That was for a much shorter duration, Irin,” I pointed out, “during which time Sandra Patton and I became guests of Huerta Memorial.” At Ori’s questioning look, I sighed. “That’s a bit of a story as well.” I heated water for a pot of tea, adding, “We can return to the lounge with our tea. I’ll share why we were working with Massani.”

**AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA**

Oriana stared at the image of the station as it rapidly grew in apparent size on the monitor. “This is where you live now? It seems kind of … I don’t know … gloomy is the only word that comes to mind.” She was standing close to the virtual viewport, studying the station’s image as it grew in size. “So, if it was originally a research outpost for Cerberus, there must have been a lot of equipment left behind when the people left, right?”

I chuckled. “Not nearly as much as you would imagine. Station logs show Cerberus personnel arriving within a week or so of their departure and removing everything that was easily portable.”

A worried look crossed her face as she asked, “Cerberus doesn’t exist anymore, right? I mean, there won’t be a group of their soldiers showing up to reclaim the place, will there?”

“The Illusive Man is truly dead, Ori … his ideals may live on in scattered remnants of his followers
—mostly in Alliance-controlled space—but the organization itself died when he did, of that I’m sure.” I chuckled as I added, “And a gloomy appearance is a good thing for us. Trust me … there are lights and atmo where it counts. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

Oriana’s comment about the gloomy appearance of the station put a thought in my mind … the salarians had managed to overcome the problems of applying cloaking technology to structures the size of interstellar warships; I believed their technology could be adapted to the station’s exterior, making it even more unlikely that anyone simply traveling through the system would inadvertently discover us. I decided to research adapting a cloaking system to the station’s hull as soon as possible.

“This is amazing, Samantha … Sammy. An entire suite? … with an attached office area?” She was standing in the center of her small lounge, her expression one of astonishment. “This was a Cerberus facility? How much remodeling did you have to do in order to accomplish all this?”

I chuckled. “Less than you think. Jack Harper, for all his anti-alien ways, took good care of the people he employed. His only expectation was complete loyalty.” My omnitool lit up as it received a text from Griff, to which I responded by requesting he join me to meet with our new accountant.

Returning my attention to Oriana, I motioned towards the kitchenette. “Would you care for some coffee? … or tea? My partner is on his way up from the hanger; he wants to meet you, and we need to have a discussion about your duties.”

Ori replied, “A cup of tea would be wonderful, Sammy.”

I grinned as I set a kettle on the stovetop to heat some water, then nodded to indicate a nearby cupboard and said, “Dry goods are stored inside there.”

I heard a slight gasp as she opened the door I’d indicated. “You placed all this in here? … just for me?”

I smiled in response. “I wanted to make sure you’d have all the basics. After you’ve had a chance to settle in, take stock of the supplies you have, then give Griff or myself a list of the things you need so we can obtain them for you.”

♦

NOS AEDELOS, ILLIUM · TASALE SYSTEM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

Captain Roshida B’Sayle looked intently at each of her team members—her friends—as she outlined their planned assault on the warehouse that was home to Jona Sederis, along with twenty Eclipse sisters that formed the core of her most trusted protectors. “Each of you will have to hit your marks precisely if we expect to still be standing when we leave this planet.”

She directed her attention to her sniper. “Joy, you’re on overwatch. With the exception of the small apartment where Sederis lives, this warehouse is fairly open top-to-bottom. In the past, it was used as a secure staging location for high-value cargo before it was distributed to locations in the city. It’s also been used to warehouse mechs … Erin noted there are several LOKI Mechs walking around on the second and third levels.”

“How am I going to cover multiple levels, Cap? … I’m good, but …”

“The floors aren’t solid, Joy. There’s a catwalk that runs around the perimeter inside, with a view down and across the lower levels; you’ll be able to access it from the roof. All the intervening
platforms are open mesh, so you’ll have a good view of anything and everything moving around below your position. Use AP-rounds in that big-ass rifle … bullets will plow right through any obstructions. The mechs will be easy to target just by the noise they make walking on metal surfaces.”

Upon receiving a nod from S’Raxia, Roshida turned her attention to her lieutenant. “Celia, you, Cat, and Del need to eliminate Jona’s soldiers.”

Celia frowned, “Won’t they be cloaked as well?”

“Eclipse sisters look down on anyone hiding behind a cloaking generator … they all feel it’s a cowardly way to do business.” B’Sayle grinned. “I expect they’ll wish for cloaks of any kind before we leave here.” Sweeping her eyes across her team, she said, “Let’s get this done.”

It was a precision strike; Roshida B’Sayle and her teammates, with expert assistance from a well-placed sniper on overwatch, overwhelmed the LOKI mechs and twenty Eclipse sisters as they swept through the warehouse in a coordinated assault.

Upon reaching the entrance to Sederis’s apartment, they found it had a non-hardened, unarmored hatch; once the Haptic lock was released, Cat and Del were through the opening before the hatch segments had completely retracted. Moving fast and staying low, Cat took Suvanni D’Klan’s life with a biotic charge that culminated in a precision strike from her sword; Suvanni’s lifeless body spun about and collapsed where she had been standing as her head fell to the floor.

Condella chose to quickly envelope Sederis in a Stasis field, in case she needed to be questioned by B’Sayle before she died.

With the two Huntresses then guarding the entrance against any possible reinforcements, Roshida and Celia moved through the apartment, searching through all of Jona’s records concerning the many business dealings of the Eclipse.

While they were so engaged, Joya’s voice whispered into their comms. “Reinforcements just entered the warehouse … group of twelve … no, fifteen. They’ve split up and are heading for your position. I’ll need a bit of help to take them all down.”

B’Sayle nodded at Celia. “Take Del … Cat can stay here, just inside the entrance.”

The Adept nodded, glanced at Condella and moved, the pair engaging their cloaking generators as they left. Roshida watched them go, then addressed Sederis, still bound by a Stasis field. “Too bad you chose to ignore T’Loak’s one rule, Jona. It’s gonna be the end of Eclipse here … and on Omega Station.”

The insane asari could do nothing but glare in impotent rage as Erinna Thyria methodically hacked into and opened every file stored on the Eclipse computers, accompanied by the sounds of armed and biotic conflict filtering in through the open door, with the most prominent sounds the echoing reports coming from Joya’s Black Widow; the cries of pain and fear from the overmatched Eclipse reinforcements gradually lessened, then ceased altogether. Moments after silence descended on the warehouse, Celia reentered the apartment. “Threat neutralized, Cap’n.”

“Good. Stay vigilant … Erin’s almost done here.”

♦

AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM • HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

I watched Griff closely as he greeted our new accountant … I could see in his eyes he was
immediately taken—maybe even besotted—with this virtual twin to Miranda Lawson. After making some coffee for myself and Griff, the three of us sat in Oriana’s new lounge, there to discuss in a bit more detail what we needed her to accomplish for us.

I leveled my gaze at Lawson’s violet-blue eyes as I said, “Your position here will evolve over the coming weeks, Ori. I cannot imagine a woman as intelligent as yourself not becoming bored with your job, once you have all the numbers lined up to your satisfaction.” I sipped from my mug as I thought about her additional tasks. I waved my free hand around above my head as I said, “This is the new headquarters for a galaxy-wide data collection operation. We’ve just hired eight people that once performed research for a data miner I’m sure you’ve heard of … the Shadow Broker?”

I watched her mouth drop open and eyes go wide. After a few moments, she said, “The Shadow Broker was eliminated by Commander Shepard near the end of the Collector campaign. Miranda told me as much, just prior to the Reaper invasion.”

“Did she tell you who replaced him? … who took over the network and redirected all that data harvesting ability towards finding a way to stopping the Reapers?”

“She didn’t … she knew who it was, of that I’m certain, but wouldn’t tell me … probably in order to protect me … or them.”

I smiled grimly. “That desire works both ways, Ori … and I’m in total agreement with her. There are a lot of really bad people out there … people that would stop at nothing to discover the true identity of the Shadow Broker.” I finished my coffee and rose from the chair; crouching in front of her, I grasped a cool hand and said, “Truth be known, Ori … Griff and I … we’re the lead researchers, and agents, for the Shadow Broker.” At the instant look of fear in her eyes, I grasped her other hand as I added, “We’re rebuilding the Broker’s network, galaxy-wide. Despite his fearsome reputation, the Shadow Broker does nothing immoral or illegal … or I would never have agreed to work for him.”

Pulling her hands gently as I stood up from my crouch, I continued to explain. “The Broker made me an offer I didn’t feel I could refuse, Ori … it’s why I left the Alliance Navy.” I stared hard into a pair of fearful eyes. “You are in no danger from the Shadow Broker, Griff, me … or anyone else on this station, Oriana Lawson. I personally guarantee you will be safe from harm as long as you live here, especially since I made that promise to your sister.”

Her expression gradually relaxed at my soothing tone. Finding her voice again, she said “I never dreamed you were working for the Shadow Broker, Sammy … or that I would be working for him as well.” She glanced at Griff before focusing on me. “If I chose to leave here now, this minute? … would you take me back to Eden Prime?”

“Yes, I would! … or wherever else you might wish to go, Ori … even though you now have knowledge that could place our lives … and yours! … at great risk.” At her puzzled expression, I added, “You know the location of this facility. I’m placing a great deal of trust in your discretion, Oriana; that said, you wouldn’t need to ride back in Iringû-Eßizkur … we can use our shuttlecraft.” I looked at Griff, silently imploring him with my eyes.

“I could never be sure, but I felt she wasn’t completely serious when she asked, “Does that include an introduction to the Shadow Broker?”
“Not right away, and never in person,” he responded. “The Broker will introduce himself when he’s ready to meet you … through a vid-call. He doesn’t reside on this station; truth be told, we really don’t know where he lives.” Griff shrugged and glanced at me, then looked back to Oriana. Holding out an arm crooked at the elbow, he asked, “Shall we?”

Oriana hooked her hand onto his arm, prompting the big man to lead her out of her quarters. I was confident that Griff would be able to soothe her apprehensions about living and working here. I just hope he doesn’t promise her unlimited wealth and power! If he does, it’ll be coming out of his personal comp! I chuckled.

When I returned to her quarters at the end of the day, Oriana had unpacked and put her clothing and few personal possessions away in her modest suite, assuaging my fear she would demand an immediate trip back to Eden Prime or the Citadel. Oriana’s decision to remain on the station and work for us—even if her stay proved to only be temporary—had me feeling more hopeful than ever about our ultimate success as a data mining organization.

“Getting settled in?” I smiled. “Anything you need us to provide?” The grin I received in return made my heart flutter. Why does she have to be so damned attractive?

“Everything I’d ever need seems to be here, Sammy.” She gazed around her, then redirected her attention to me. “So, when can I get to work?”

“Tomorrow morning, right after you join us for breakfast. There are a few additional tasks we need you to accomplish … which I will explain while we eat. Sleep well tonight, Oriana.”

♦

NOS AEDELOS, ILLIUM · TASALE SYSTEM, CRESCENT NEBULA ♦

Captain Roshida B’Sayle grinned as she looked around what was now the former home of Eclipse founder—and insane leader—Jona Sederis, currently residing inside a specially prepared stasis chamber the Broker squad would be using to transport the crippled asari to Omega Station.

B’Sayle would use subterfuge to get the chamber past the authorities to the Desorspar, the small vessel that would return them all to Omega Station; the chamber was sealed inside a specially constructed shipping crate bearing forged diplomatic seals from the galactic council, ensuring it would not be opened for inspection. The Broker squad had placed all their specialized weaponry inside the crate, thus ensuring any physical scans of them would turn up nothing more than the standard hand-to-hand weapons—such as Cat’s and Del’s swords—most asari commandos carried.

Thinking of the team’s Huntresses, she frowned for a moment. With the home locations provided by Jona’s records, and accompanied by Celia and Erin, they had set out to eliminate the several remaining Eclipse sisters still in the city. When they departed Illium this evening, an Eclipse presence would no longer exist in Nos Aedelos.

B’Sayle grinned at a new thought. It would be up to Omega’s pirate queen and her station’s security forces to eliminate Eclipse from the station, a task that should be easier without the leadership of Jona Sederis. Wonder if she’ll actually place Jona’s head on a spike outside the entrance to Afterlife, she mused. Ah well, it’s nothing I need to worry over … Aria T’Loak will be able to deal with Sederis however she wishes. Probably won’t be happy we’re bringing her back alive, but that’s not my problem. We’re not murderers for hire.

Roshida was so ready for this assignment to be over.
I had just returned to my bedroom after enjoying a relaxing shower. As I was finishing blotting the excess moisture from my hair, my desktop intercom unit quietly trilled, to be followed by a terse message from Buchanan. “Sammy, you need to see this.”

Buchanan never summoned me from the sanctuary of my quarters unless there was some really important—or dreadful—new information about any of the many paths we were investigating. I palmed the ACCEPT control and replied, “Before breakfast, Griff? How bad is it?”

As the comms unit was audio only, I knew that even though he was unable to see my nudity, the embarrassed tone of his voice left no doubt in my mind the man knew my pre-breakfast routine – wake up, pull on exercise clothes, go to our shared gym for an hour of intense exercise, then return to my quarters for a leisurely shower before getting dressed for the day and joining him for breakfast. Dammit! My schedule is too regular if he knows when I’m getting dressed.

As if he really could see me, he replied, “Bad enough for me to call you out before you’re dressed, Sammy. Join me in the research area as soon as you can … I’ll meet you there with a cup of strong coffee. You’re gonna need it.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen, Griff.” I cut the connection, finished drying and brushing my hair, then pulled my clothes on. Taking a last look in the full-length mirror, I grabbed the length of my brown hair and secured it at my neck with an elastic tie. Looks almost as long as Xiülán’s, I thought. Probably ought to get it cut, but I kinda like it … and it’s actually a bit of a disguise, since no one expects to meet Samantha Traynor with long hair. Wondering what could be so dire that Griff would need my immediate presence, I walked quickly to our research center.
Making Connections

Don’t pursue something with a vengeful heart, or it will destroy you. Hate wraps a cold hand around your heart and hollows you out. — Dannika Dark (Twist [Mageri, #2; Mageriverse #2])

Inamorata – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

Irín – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

Qíngrán – [情人] – lover

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

Griff placed a mug brimming full with hot coffee in my hands as I walked through the entry to our research area. “Comms traffic we’ve been monitoring between Garrett Sutton and the various people that answer to him have taken on a—tone, for lack of a better word—that I can only describe as ominous.”

He reacted to my immediate frown by adding, “It’s nothing I can point to and say ‘There! That’s what I’m talking about!’, but we’ve been looking at this bastard for so long, even I can tell something is different.”

“You think he’s on to us? … think he’s aware we’ve been building a case against him?”

Without taking his eyes from my face, Griff slowly shook his head. “It’s not us, Sammy. His ire is directed at the top brass … Admiral Hackett, and General Park in particular.” With his mouth set in a tight, grim line, he added, “I believe that miserable whoreson is in the early stages of planning an assassination, Sammy … her… assassination.”

“Shit! If that’s true, we need to warn her … I need to warn her, Griff.” Thinking that Garrett Sutton could be so damned spiteful as to plot the murder of a high-ranking Alliance officer made my heart clench. “I refuse to allow anyone, especially RaeLee Park, pay a price for my desire to see that sonuvabitch answer for his crimes! I’ll go to the Citadel and kill ’im myself before I let that happen!”

“Shouldn’t be necessary, Sammy,” came the quiet reply. “Once General Park is aware of the threat, there are a number of steps she can take to lessen the size of the target on her back.”

“Being a smaller target only means there’s still a chance Sutton could succeed.” I spent several minutes sipping my coffee while silently thinking about what we needed to do. “Griff, the Broker is going to call Amber Watson … she can contact General Park and give her our warning, and our suggestion that she take some serious precautions.”

“Sounds good, Sammy. Meanwhile, I’ll get in touch with Spectre Shepard … share our findings, maybe ask that she meet with Admiral Hackett as soon as she can arrange it.”

I finished my coffee while Griff loaded a datapad with the information we’d discovered; I took the few steps necessary to enter the compartment we used for Broker communications, pulled on my hooded cloak, then sent a command to the computer controlling the equipment. I closely inspected
my image in the monitor as the connections were made through numerous comm buoys.

Within minutes, I was looking at our agent in Vancouver, Amber Watson. I made sure there was no trace of cordiality in my manner or voice as I said, “Ms Watson.”

She may have been nervous, but her voice was rock solid when she answered. “Shadow Broker. It is rare that you need to contact me directly. What may I do for you?”

Despite the confident speech, I could see the woman was less than pleased at being contacted by the Broker. I replied in an even voice, “I need you to contact an Alliance Marine general … she’s stationed at the local base. I have information she needs, which I am forwarding to you now.”

“Whatever you require, Shadow Broker.”

I transmitted all the data Buchanan had gathered concerning Garrett Sutton’s plans. Amber looked to her right as the information arrived, then spent a few moments scanning the highlights.

Returning her attention to my image on her screen, she said, “Will this General Park believe what I have to share with her?”

“We live in extraordinary times, Ms Watson. The general may be hesitant when you first contact her, but I believe you will have no problem convincing her of the validity of the data.”

“Very well, Shadow Broker. I will contact General Park immediately.”

“See that you do. Good day.” As there was nothing else that needed to be said, I terminated the connection and sat back in my chair, glad that we had an agent actually living in Vancouver.

Buchanan must have been monitoring from outside the compartment; he entered as soon as the screen went blank and asked, “Okay, Sammy … what’s next?”

“I promised Rachaël I would research the improvements Sutton has made to his residence and office. We need to look for hidden compartments—safe rooms, concealed passageways and the like—before she arrives to drop the hammer.” I had the beginnings of a headache radiating from the back of my skull; I massaged my neck with one hand while holding my datapad in the other.

“Since we’ve been at this,” Griff offered, “I’ve uncovered a number of people that can discreetly shadow a person, Sammy. All we need to do is identify the target … they’ll take care of the rest.”

“It’s much too soon to be implementing such measures, Griff, and unfortunately, we’ll not have an easy time keeping tabs on this particular general.”

Buchanan slowly shook his head at the truth of my words before concluding, “Of that, I’m sure.”

I returned to our combination dining area and lounge while Buchanan made his call to Thessia: I did the mental calculation and realized it was the wee hours of the morning in Armali … Griff was going to need to leave a message with the estate’s captain of the guard, asking for a return call from Spectre Shepard at her convenience.

As I refilled my mug with fresh coffee, I heard the hatch slide open behind me, accompanied by quiet conversation between Oriana and Chinami’Taelas. I had nearly forgotten that Lawson would be having breakfast with me … I was going to outline what I needed her to accomplish in her position as our accountant. It gladdened my heart to see her happily chatting with Chinami as if
she had known the quarian all her life, and it certainly couldn’t hurt that Chinami had another female—besides myself—with whom she’d be able to share things.

After heating a pre-packaged breakfast tray, I grabbed it and my mug and strolled over to the table occupied by Oriana and Chinami. “Mind if I join you?”

Oriana’s eyes twinkled as she smirked, “Yes, actually … we do.” At my expression of disbelief, Chinami added in an equally snarky tone, “But only if all we’ll be discussing is our jobs.”

I set my tray and mug on the table across from the pair. Taking a seat, I looked at each in turn as I quietly said, “Gee … that’s the main reason I asked you to have breakfast with me, Ori. I did not expect you to enlist Chinami in an effort to mutiny so soon after your arrival.”

Oriana arched her eyebrows as her eyes went wide in shock. “I’m sorry, Sammy! I didn’t mean … that is … you didn’t really believe I was serious, did you?”

I studied the beautiful violet-blue eyes nervously looking back at me for a moment before allowing a grin to slowly spread across my face. “My apologies, Ori …” I looked at the quarian as I added, “… and to you, Chinami.” Refocusing on Oriana, I added, “In addition to setting your agenda and directing your work here, I would hope you might consider me a friend.”

Lawson slowly relaxed … her lips hinting at a suppressed smile. “I think I would like that, Sammy. I haven’t had many acquaintances in my life, much less people I could count as friends.” She smiled at the young quarian beside her, admitting, “That goes for you as well, Chinami. I have had almost no interactions with any of the galaxy’s other races … certainly no quarians. I truly relish the opportunity to get to know you better.”

Chinami happily replied, “I would very much like that, Oriana, and I welcome the opportunity to learn more about you.”

Ori returned her attention to me as I said, “I’m really pleased the two of you are committed to becoming friends, but back to business, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course, Sammy. Do you have an outline of my duties?”

I took a sip from my mug as I handed a datapad to her. “Here’s your list, Ori. The various accounts you’ll be overseeing are also on that datapad, and …” I activated my omnitool with a thought and sent the master pass-code to her device, “… I just transmitted the master pass-code to your omnitool. When you first access each account, you’ll be asked to provide a personal pass-code in addition to the master code.”

I took a few minutes to address my breakfast before it completely cooled off, finished my coffee and inquired, “I suppose I should have asked already, but just how secure is your omnitool, Ori?”

Frowning slightly, she replied, “As secure as I’ve ever needed. Why do you? …” her sentence died away as realization dawned. “… I don’t expect it’s as secure as you need it to be, Sammy.”

I chortled, “We’re going to have to provide you with an upgrade, Oriana … and it doesn’t matter if you plan to leave us after only six months here … it’s critically important this organization’s chief financial officer has a secure omnitool, for however long she chooses to stay with us.”

Ori looked down for several moments, slightly embarrassed to have the conceivably short duration of her tenure revealed in front of Chinami, with whom she had instantly felt completely at ease. Returning her gaze to my face, she quietly admitted, “Truthfully, I had forgotten about my possibly short stay here. I felt I needed an easy way out, should the confined environment of a space station
prove to be too much for me to endure.”

“That’s understandable, given that you’ve almost always had solid ground under your feet.” I finished the last few bites of my breakfast, took the tray to the cleanup station, refilled my mug with fresh coffee and returned to my seat. “As soon as we’re done with breakfast, there are some research projects I need to complete. I had hoped to have the list whittled down by the time you arrived, but the tasks just seem to keep multiplying.” I sipped my coffee as I thought about what I needed to get accomplished, then added, “There’s a compartment on this level I’m upgrading, partially in response to your desire for grass under your feet … I’ll show you after we have lunch.”

Oriana smiled as she said, “After seeing the list on this datapad, I’m beginning to think I may not have time for breaks … or mid-day meals. Looks like I’m in for a lot of long days.”

“Nonsense. Standard workday rules apply here, just like for any business … that’s really important for you … and Chinami. Neither of you can do your jobs efficiently if you’re tired or hungry.”

Her reaction made me smile, as did her reply. “There’s enough work listed on this device to keep two people busy—full time—for months. You need this work done as fast as possible, right?”

I sighed, “I will admit, it would be nice to have a proper and accurate accounting of all the Broker’s assets, but I have every confidence in your abilities, Ori. Once you’ve been at it for a couple of weeks or so, I’ll take you to Thessia so you can get outfitted with a proper omnitool. The trip will give me an opportunity to visit T’Sere Shipwrights so I can see what progress has been made on refitting the *Rebekah*.”

I responded to her questioning look by explaining, “It’s a thirty-year-old asari patrol craft owned by the Brokerage … been in storage for a majority of that time. T’Sere built it as the class leader of a series of system patrol craft they produced for their military. The Broker acquired it after it was decommissioned and placed on the civilian market.”

A wry grin eked its way onto her lips. “So, you’re not planning to ride around exclusively in Iringù-Èbìzíkur?”

“Oh, there’ll still be a need to system-hop in Irin … she’s faster than any other form of transport! Unfortunately, she tends to draw a lot of generally unwelcome attention, usually from the likes of dock managers and ground facility overseers.” The last of my coffee was lukewarm by now; I finished it and rose from my seat. “Time to go to work. Let me know if you need anything, Ori.” I nodded at Chinami and left for my private research area.

I had been working on an idea that sprang to mind on Thessia, when I had to quickly warn Griff to assume the role of the Shadow Broker for a visual comms call from General Park, in which we needed to convince her that I most definitely was not the Broker … that I was only being employed as a research assistant for him.

Our ploy had worked, but I did not like having to rush something so simple when that something could possibly unravel all Griff and I had done to make the Broker independent of Liara T’Soni.

I had spent most of my morning combing through archived records of all our comms calls between the Broker—with either Griff or myself sitting in the hot seat—and other people, whether agents or customers, then combining it all into several seamless, hour-long vids that would be the visual representation of the Broker, without having to resort to one of us actually appearing on camera.
I added a short, custom-made algorithm to the playback computer … this would introduce enough variation in the electronic ‘fuzz’ that served to further disguise the Broker’s identity while on camera to—hopefully—prevent anyone from detecting the subterfuge. In order to decrease the possibility of a sharp-eyed agent suspecting what they were seeing was not real, I also added a line in the programming code that would prevent the same exact vid from being displayed twice in a row to the same person.

It wasn’t completely foolproof, but I felt there was no other choice … there would be times in the future where both of us would have to be away from the station at the same time. As long as one of us was with Iringū-Ebizkur, the Broker could personally respond to any request for a conversation. As for the audio, either Griff or myself would still provide the ‘live’ voice for the Broker … we just would not appear on camera as we had done in the past.

I sent a text to Buchanan requesting he join me, so I could show him what I had done.

After lunch, Oriana accompanied Griff and me to the still-being remodeled Zero-deck hydroponics area. The husband-wife botanist team under the direction of Cordell Webb were transforming the formerly drab, run-down place into an area filled nearly to overflowing with flourishing plants of every variety, set among winding, grassy paths with granite flagstones on which we walked during our guided tour; Webb estimated the work would be complete in ten to twelve days.

There were large, translucent panels set in the side of the outer hull; along with a number of small skylights, they allowed filtered light from the system’s star to illuminate the entire compartment. A small area was being set aside for installation of a few tables with chairs, suitable for taking a break … even having a beverage or eating lunch. Padded metal benches would be installed against the bulkheads under the deck-to-ceiling viewports, allowing one to enjoy a small measure of tranquility.

Oriana was speechless as her wandering gaze took in everything around her. When we finally sat down to talk, she gushed, “This is just … it’s quite lovely, Sammy. Nothing I would ever expect to see in a space station, especially …”

“… Something owned by the Shadow Broker?” I finished her statement with the question. “You gave me the idea when you contacted me after our lunch at the Fiery Margay on Eden Prime.”

She blushed slightly while admitting, “I did say I needed grass under my feet, didn’t I?”

“I’m hoping this area will be an acceptable substitute for being groundside on Eden Prime.”

“It’s seems perfect, Sammy,” she smiled. “I just never expected something this large!”

I grinned mischievously as Griff spoke up. “There’s a bit of magic in what you’re seeing, Ms Lawson. There are holo-emitters scattered in the overhead.” He waved an arm to emphasize his next statement. “That expansive view in the distance? … it’s a projection, added to give the illusion of greater depth.”

I giggled as I added for him, “It’d probably be best not to walk more than a few meters past the end of the pathway at the far end … you just might run into the bulkhead.”

I knew we had captured her heart when she asked, “Would it be alright if I stay here for a few more minutes, Sammy? This is simply beautiful … like an island of calm.”

“Take all the time you need, Ori.”
“Council Spectre Rachaël Shepard, here to meet with Admiral Hackett.” The Marine corporal, having accompanied Shepard from the transient hanger bay to the Fleet Admiral’s office suite within the massive dreadnaught, turned and left the woman standing at parade rest.

Her imposing presence in her N7 armor had caused the admiral’s aide a great deal of nervousness when last she’d visited; in her newly acquired Spectre armor, she was every bit as imposing as before, but the lieutenant wasn’t as cowed by her presence. Smiling, he entered some information in the console on his desk; the door behind him unlatched and slid into its pockets as the old admiral appeared from within. “Shepard! Damned if you’re not a sight to behold!” As he waved the woman into his office, he addressed his aide. “Lieutenant, hold my calls until we’re done.”

Following the Spectre into his office, he directed her to sit at the conference table, on which a service tray holding a coffee carafe and a pair of mugs bearing the seal of the Systems Alliance were awaiting them. Rachaël sat in the chair closest to the admiral’s as he filled the mugs; setting one in front of her, he took the other and sat down. Taking an appreciative sip, he fixed her with his sharp blue eyes and asked, “Okay, Rachaël … talk to me … why in ’ell did you leave your new home to meet with me here, when we can just as easily speak on a secure comms channel?”

The Spectre took several sips of coffee, then set the mug on the table and leaned back in her chair, steepling her fingertips together in front of her chest. With her mouth set in a tight, thin line, she returned Hackett’s gaze with one every bit as intense, saying, “I have some information for you, Admiral … info that will not make you or those at the top of the command structure very happy.”

She retrieved a slim datapad from a thigh pocket. Crossing her legs at the ankles, she keyed the device on, placed it on the table, then gently slid it over to rest beside the admiral’s coffee mug.

Hackett slowly picked the device up and skimmed through the contents displayed. After several long, silent minutes—in which Rachaël sipped her coffee—he returned his gaze to her face. A hint of anger colored his voice as he asked, “This has been verified? … all of it?” Her quiet acknowledgement that everything listed on the device was the unvarnished truth intensified his frown; he glowered unhappily, asking, “Under our goddamned noses, all these years?”

“Jack Harper never failed to discover the best ways to exploit people in positions that would most benefit Cerberus in their stated goals, Admiral. Unfortunately, credits were his most effective tools for gaining blind cooperation.”

Hackett was studying the datapad a bit closer. “Murder for hire, Shepard? He actually had the Anixara destroyed, just to eliminate one turian?”

Rachaël compressed her lips together in a thin, straight line for a moment before replying, “Keep reading, Admiral.” As he returned his attention to the small display, she explained, “A Marine general in Vancouver assigned a pair of operatives to discover how Cerberus intended to eliminate that turian. They uncovered the plot and developed a plan to prevent that ship’s destruction. Unfortunately, the general was overruled from above, due primarily to Admiral Fletcher’s orders.”

Hackett, after taking several additional minutes to completely read the full report, angrily shook his head as he set the datapad on the table; leaning back in his chair, he finished his coffee, placed the mug in front of him, then clasped his hands together across his middle. “These agents? … their names are not mentioned in the report. Did they survive the war, at least?”

“They did … although neither remained in the service. One of them was severely injured during the final battle on Earth, Sir, and took the medical discharge six months after the doctors admitted
they couldn’t restore his body to the level of fitness he had previously enjoyed.”

“And the other? … the unnamed specialist?”

“Made it through relatively unscathed, but …” Rachaël hesitated for a moment to carefully choose her next few words. “Jack Harper was so sure of his grip on highly placed Alliance personnel, he had absolutely no hesitation about suggesting that Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton arrange for the murder of that specialist, all because of how close she was getting to exposing the Cerberus connection to the Alliance.”

With a thin smile, the old soldier said, “Sounds suspiciously like Samantha Traynor.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that suspicion, Sir … you’ll understand my hesitation after you read all the files on that tablet. I will only say that you are … acquainted … with that woman.”

Admiral Hackett had taken only a short time to completely review all the data with which Shepard had presented him; their discussion over salient points within the narrative had taken longer, to the point he insisted the Spectre have lunch with him before leaving the Orizaba.

As they ate, he wondered just how Shepard intended to place Lieutenant Commander Sutton in custody. “The man is well-protected in his offices and residence on the Citadel. I can’t imagine you’ll be able to extricate him without resorting to bloodshed.” He took a couple of swallows of beer from his mug, used a linen napkin to blot moisture from his mouth, then continued, “After his fall from grace at Arcturus … demotion in rank, subsequent transfer, he kept an extremely low profile while rebuilding his powerbase. By the end of the war, his previous rank had been restored and he no longer needed Jack Harper’s credits.”

Shepard finished the last of her salad, pushed back from the table slightly and sighed. “There’s research being done as we speak, Sir. When I’m finally ready to go after him, there will be nowhere for him to hide.”

Hackett felt he already knew the answer, but stated his opinion anyway. “If I was a betting man, I’d lay ten-to-one odds that Samantha Traynor is doing this … research … just as I believe her to be the source of the plethora of evidence against Sutton and Fletcher.”

Rachaël hid her smirk by polishing off her beer, then chuckled. “I did say you were acquainted with her, Admiral. You may even suspect she’s more than a simple research tech.”

Hackett cocked his head. “I believe she’s the goddamned Shadow Broker, Rachaël!—or has been working for him—ever since she resigned her commission.”

Shepard’s laugh was immediate. “Ms Traynor’s abilities were the main reason Bill Cody … and you … wanted her to ride around in Iringû-Eßizkur, but … she’s still only a research specialist, Admiral. I’ll admit she’s a damn good one… but it’s pretty obvious she’s not working alone on this project.”

Shepard shook her head and huffed, before continuing, “I believe, to gather all of this data, she must be part of a larger network. But, I’ve worked with and spoken to the Broker … all while Traynor sat at my side … so it is most definitely not her.” Rachaël put all of her conviction into her statement to her long-time commanding officer … and friend. Even given Liara’s former occupancy of the position, Shepard was still surprised to find it wasn’t a difficult lie to tell.

Besides herself and Liara, Rachaël could count on one hand the people that knew for a fact Samantha Traynor actually was the Shadow Broker; there were several more—like Hackett—that
suspected, but did not know for sure. Rachaél intended to keep it that way, as there was no way to determine how quickly a determined assassin could end Sammy’s life … or Buchanan’s.

The old Admiral leaned back in his chair as a soft knock sounded at the entry. With a nod to Shepard, he used his omnitool to release the lock, allowing the steward to enter; the man silently collected the dishes and mugs, wiped the table, and was gone. Alone once more, Hackett spoke softly. “I simply have to trust you on this, Shepard … and you’ve never given me cause to do otherwise, so I will. I just ask that you keep me in the loop, Spectre, before … and after … you take that man down.”

“You’ll receive regular updates, Admiral … count on it.”

♦ OMEGA STATION · OMEGA NEBULA, SAHRABARIK SYSTEM ♦

Tulana Varinian silently waited as the Desorspar—the small vessel used to transport the Shadow Broker strike team to Illium and back—slid like a ghost into its assigned berth in the bowels of Omega Station. The docks on this level were normally teeming with small-to-medium sized ore haulers, but the illegal trade in refined eezo had slowed sales of the exotic mineral to a mere trickle.

As soon as the cargo ramp touched the surface of the dock, the Shadow Broker strike team, led by Roshida B’Sayle, slowly walked from the ship; two members of the team, Catalina T’Gelvos and Condella Selani, guided the hover lift equipped stasis chamber, within which the main reason for their trip to Illium was confined.

The six asari paused when they reached the still waiting turian; Varinian walked up to the stasis chamber and, after taking a quick look through the top-mounted viewport, immediately drew back and rounded on B’Sayle. “She’s supposed to be dead, Captain. Your instructions were to eliminate the Eclipse on Illium …”

Roshida was tired, which shortened an already short fuse; she interrupted, “… I was instructed, and I quote: ‘Your primary target is to be returned here in the stasis container on board the transport,’ end quote. Nothing in the mission parameters stated the primary target was to be killed.”

“Eclipse was to be completely eliminated from Nos Aedelos, Captain. That meant everyone.”

“Which has been done.” The slightest hint of amorphous, blue tendrils of biotic dark energy slowly gathered at her hands, but she maintained an outwardly calm façade as she quietly stated, “The primary target was captured as requested, and securely brought back to Omega Station for someone’s amusement; I can only assume that someone is Aria T’Loak.”

“She will not be pleased by this, Captain” Tulana declared. “She doesn’t wish to kill Sedaris herself … she only wants her head on a pike outside Afterlife.”

“That’s not your call to make, turian! You just arranged the fucking transport … I’m the mission commander.” B’Sayle had had enough. “Understand? She’ll probably enjoy snuffing out what remains of Jona Sedaris’s life; she’s an invalid! Even out of stasis, she’s completely defenseless.” The captain looked around at her team before continuing. “Besides, we get paid regardless of how the station’s queen feels concerning our results, and I truly believe she’s not foolish enough to stiff the Shadow Broker out of his fee for this little expedition.”

Placing a datapad in front of Tulana, she said, “Signature and thumbprint, please.”

The turian gave the datapad a quick glance and asked, “What in spirit’s name is this?”
“Receipt for the stasis pod and its contents … because my team isn’t going to Afterlife. So, it’s now your responsibility to get Sedaris back to your boss.” Roshida scowled at the turian’s hesitation. “I don’t have all day. Take it or leave it … but if you leave it, you get to explain to Aria why you returned without the pod. And, just so you know, this entire conversation is being recorded and uploaded to the Broker net in real-time … as proof of delivery.”

After several more moments of staring daggers at this brash asari, Tulana Varinian dropped her gaze to the datapad Roshida was holding. With a heavy sigh of defeat, she scrawled her name at the bottom, touched her thumb to the display, then activated her omnitool to call for assistance.

Roshida smiled grimly as she tucked the datapad away; picking up her travel bags, she turned to her companions and said, “Okay, crew … let’s get to the Harashi so we can go home.”

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

The fifteen days since I had assigned a strike team to eliminate the Eclipse from Nos Aedelos for Aria T’Loak had passed in relative peace and quiet. Oriana Lawson had joined us on the station and had made significant progress in untangling the twisted web of finances that enabled the Shadow Broker the freedom to poke his nose into the secrets of anyone and everyone in the galaxy. Additionally, Chinami’Taelas nar Jellicoe had done an excellent job of correcting the errors in the station’s environmental control programs, and had subsequently agreed to stay on the station as the Broker’s lead programmer; that she had quickly made friends with Ori was a real plus.

After reading the after-action report from Roshida B’Sayle, I knew it—the peace and quiet I was enjoying—would not last; it was actually a relief when an incoming comms call revealed an always nervous Jipaw Zilorno. Apparently, our salarian agent on Omega Station had an upset pirate queen literally pounding on his door—she actually knew the location of his offices on the station, but would never lower herself to personally going there—demanding to speak directly with the Broker.

It took less than a minute for me to activate the playback computer that would present an image of the Broker; I donned a mic-equipped headset and sat in front of a split-screen monitor that would show a previously recorded image of either Griff or myself as the Shadow Broker alongside the image of Aria T’Loak. After exchanging a brief greeting with the salarian, he cross-faded his image to that of a thoroughly unhappy asari.

Knowing her connection to my comms was still being routed through Zilorno’s office, and relaxed in the knowledge Aria couldn’t actually see me, I leaned back in my chair as I greeted her. “Aria T’Loak … what service may the Shadow Broker render for you today?”

“Just skip the pleasantries, you pompous ass! What’s the meaning of your team leaving Jona Sedaris alive in a damned stasis chamber? They were only supposed to bring me her head!”

Since I had already seen the full report from B’Sayle, it was relatively easy for me to keep any amusement from creeping into my voice as I replied, “Which they did. Is there some problem of which I am not aware? Did they not complete the assignment?”

“It was supposed to be separated from her fucking body!” she growled. “It was the only proof I required that your commandos had completed their primary task on Illium! What in Goddess’ name am I to do with her now she’s on my station?”

I allowed some anger of my own to gradually creep into my voice as I answered her. “Nowhere in the mission parameters was that request stated, T’Loak, and I feel I must remind you I can have
you eliminated as easily as I would crush a bothersome insect. You would do well to keep a civil
tongue in your head.”

I grinned at her reaction. She nervously licked her lips while glancing around; when she finally
replied, her words held less bite to them. “You think this is funny? What am I to do with her?”

I prefaced my reply with a low chuckle. “Why, you’re supposed to kill her … or are you no longer
capable of getting your hands dirty in that manner?”

It was good to see that my words caused her to blanch slightly. “I did not think I would be required
to stoop to her level, Broker.”

“She is in a stasis pod, T’Loak; place it on display at the entrance to Afterlife. I’m sure the
station’s Eclipse contingent will appreciate being able to see their leader whenever they wish.”

The glittering eyes narrowed in thought. After several moments, she nodded once and spoke.
“That idea would actually have some merit, if I didn’t have to worry the Eclipse would somehow
deactivate the damned thing and set her free on the station.”

“You’re a smart person, T’Loak. Rig it with a tamper sensor – a failsafe. It would be simple to
have the chamber self-destruct if any attempt was made to open or relocate it … the explosion
would kill Sedaris and anyone foolish enough to screw with it.”

After thinking about my suggestion for a number of seconds, she slowly nodded again as a small
grin appeared. “You have my apologies, Broker … and my thanks. I now believe having that
miserable harpy trapped within a stasis chamber so rigged will be an even more effective deterrent
to Eclipse activity than simply having her head on a pike at the entrance. Goodbye.” She
terminated her end of the connection, which cut my connection to Zilorno’s equipment.

I removed my headset and stared unseeing at the blank screen for several minutes in silent
contemplation of my actions, then stood and slowly walked to my adjacent research station.

I was so engrossed in my investigation into the various ways Garrett Sutton could leave his
personal quarters, as well as his workplace in the consular offices near the various embassies on
the Presidium, it was actually a surprise when Buchanan rapped his knuckles on the door frame
and entered. “What the ’ell, Sammy? Are you going to knock off for dinner?”

I looked up at him and had to cover my mouth as a huge yawn escaped me. I didn’t need to check
my chrono to know it was late; my stomach had been grumbling for a while. “Wasn’t watching the
time, Griff … been busy mapping out all the ways that miserable rat bastard can escape from
wherever he happens to be. Some of his routes actually run through Keeper tunnels.”

“Have you heard back from Amber Watson? Did she warn General Park of our suspicions?”

I frowned slightly. “Haven’t heard back since the Broker spoke with her week before last.” I
sighed, then added, without much faith in my words, “I’m sure the general is okay. Not much
happens around that Alliance base about which we’re unaware, and Watson would have contacted
us if anything had happened.”

Buchanan had a soft spot in his heart for his true friends … me, Xiülán, General Park … and now
Oriana and Chinami had been added to his list. He appeared all hard on the outside to everyone
with whom he interacted, but he was actually pretty damned mushy on the inside. “I just don’t
want to see Park come to any harm, Sammy.”
Neither do I, Griff. Neither do I.”

I went to bed while pondering RaeLee Park’s dilemma regarding the insane amount of credits Garrus Vakarian was demanding from the Alliance in order to make the problem of the Anixara’s destruction go away; as I was no longer in the Alliance military, that particular problem wasn’t really mine to solve. My entire rationale for pursuing Fletcher and Sutton was to make them pay for their treachery towards the Ø7 program in general and myself in particular.

I realized with a start that I had become fixated on seeing both officers—Sutton in particular—pay for all the shit I had suffered because of their connections to Cerberus. I hated both of them for what they had done during the war … and prior to the invasion. Discovering that Admiral Fletcher had revealed my location to Michael Moser Lang, and that Jack Harper had directed Sutton to investigate the possibility of having me murdered on Arcturus Station, had only increased the antipathy with which I regarded every last one of them.

Harper was dead … and for the most part, Cerberus had died with him. Fletcher had chosen to eat a bullet rather than face the consequences of his treasonous crimes through the years. And Sutton … Sutton was still alive … still using the system to his own advantage … and apparently plotting the untimely death of General RaeLee Park.

Thinking about everything that had happened over the past few years—particularly the previous six months—was keeping me awake. I needed to speak with someone … someone outside of my own close circle of friends on this station. Someone … like Yuán Xiùlán. I needed to speak with my Inamorata … needed to see her.

Thinking about Xiùlán’s love for me pushed all the other thoughts … uncertainty … fears … out of my mind. I’ll call her in the morning, I promised myself. With the image of my Chinese Qíngrén in my mind, I quickly drifted off into pleasant slumber.
Threat Analysis

We all have moments of darkness, moments when we are so unlike ourselves. And like vultures, they wait for a slip, a misstep, then they take that part of us and try to convince the world that is all we are. — Lang Leav

Ai – [愛 - love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)]
In bocca al lupo – Good Luck (Italian)
Kaffe – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

♦ SSV HONG KONG, AT LARGE · ARGOS RHO ♦

Captain Yuán Xiùlán was silently reviewing the reports from her department heads when a muted, tri-toned alarm began sounding from the secure comms device sitting in the back of her wardrobe. Sà mài … came the happy thought. Haven’t heard from her in a while … wonder what’s up. She quickly activated the vid-terminal at her elbow and linked it to the comms unit.

The solemn image that resolved itself on her screen must have surprised her; even though I had slept well enough the previous evening, I still felt tired, probably because of all the different directions I was being pulled. Despite my attempt at a smile, the suddenly suspicious expression on her face told me she had noticed my fatigued appearance before I even opened my mouth to greet her. “Hello, Ai. We haven’t talked in a while … how have you been?”

“I’ve been fine, Sà mài … everything’s good. However, you look as if you haven’t slept in a week! Maybe even a bit like death warmed over. What’s the matter, darling? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine, Xiùlán, really.” I paused for a moment, then continued with, “No, that’s a lie. I’m really tired, and I truly need to meet with you, darling. Can you get a three-day pass so we can get together somewhere? … for a couple of days? … my place on the Citadel, perhaps? We can do some shopping, have a couple of quiet dinners out. I really need someone to talk to … need to get my head clear of all the stuff I’m dealing with.” I blinked when a tear escaped one eye, to leave a glistening trail as it slid down my cheek. “I need to feel your arms around me, Ai. Is that something that can happen? … soon?”

“I’ll place the request immediately, darling, and send you a text with the dates.” She looked down for a few moments; returning her gaze to the image on her screen, she said, “Méiyǒu nǐ de ài wǒ de shēnghuó shì bù wánzhěng de!” [沒有你的愛我的生活是不完整的 – My life is not complete without your love!] Cheer up … we’ll be together soon, I promise.”

I allowed a snarky expression to creep onto my face. “You’re in the Alliance Navy, darling. You shouldn’t make promises your superiors may not agree with.” Shaking my head, I concluded with, “Just do your best, my love, and let me know when. I’ll meet you the instant the Hong Kong touches down at the Citadel. Nǐ de ài wǒ de shēnghuó wánzhěngle!” [你的愛使我的生活完整了 – Your love completes my life!]

Xiùlán grinned. Touching the fingertips of one hand to her lips, I watched her place them on her viewscreen on the location I suspected my mouth was being displayed. With a quiet “Zàijiàn,” [再見 – Goodbye] she cut the connection, clasped her hands behind her head and leaned back in her
chair. After staring at the overhead for half-a-minute, she stood, stretched, and left her quarters for
the comms center between Decks One and Two.

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

I felt much better after my brief comms call to Xiülán; the prospect of spending a few days with her
—the last time we’d been together was on Grissom Academy Station in the Petra Nebula—had a
soothing effect on my mood … almost as if our proposed rendezvous had already occurred.

I joined Buchanan, Oriana and Chinami in our combination lounge and dining area; with a
steaming mug of coffee in hand, I sat next to the quarian at the table. After taking several sips of
the aromatic beverage, I looked at each of them in turn as our newly hired chef set a loaded plate in
front of each of us. I suddenly realized that Chinami had removed her entire helmet, leaving only
the patterned, fabric cowl covering her head; this prompted me to ask, “Chinami, how is it that you
won’t get sick?”

She turned partway to look at me as she replied, “Commander Shepard’s choice on the Citadel …
remember? Her choice of synthesis affected all of us, my people … and the geth in particular;
quarians that live in the same, relatively sterile environment and interact with the same few people
on a daily basis—as I now do—have only a slightly increased chance of getting sick.” She turned
back to her breakfast and took several mouthfuls as I gazed at her unmasked face.

Short, wavy hair in a brilliant shade of lavender, highlighted with variegated, translucent streaks of
reddish-blue, framed a pale, oval-shaped face with light, greenish-blue skin. Lush lips sat
invitingly under a pixyish nose dusted faintly with a sprinkling of freckles, and she viewed her
world through vertically oriented slit-irises, similar to those of most felines on Earth. Her eyes
resembled pale, violet-white opals, glowing with hints of jeweled orange and blue fire around the
edges.

I tore my eyes away to look at Griff, who was unabashedly staring at the quarian in open-mouth
wonder. I broke his concentration by gently kicking him under the table; he responded by glancing
at me before returning his gaze to Chinami. He cleared his throat and told her what I was
thinking. “Chinami, I don’t wish to make you uncomfortable, but your face is beautiful …
strikingly so.”

She dropped her eyes in embarrassment, saying in a soft voice, “Few but family have ever seen me
without my mask … you three are the first outsiders … the first humans, ever.” She directed her
gaze back to Buchanan and smiled coquettishly. “You really think I’m attractive?”

It was Griff’s turn to blush; he looked down at his breakfast for several moments before returning
his gaze to her mesmerizing, opalescent eyes “Chinami, I really don’t have the words necessary to
describe how lovely you are … but yes, I think you’re attractive … very much so.”

I cleared my throat and said, “I saw Tali’Zorah without her mask a number of times during my
tenure on the Normandy, Chinami. Seeing you unmasked today simply confirms my feelings that
quarian females are hiding an exotic allure behind their tinted visors. You could be her cousin.”

The quarian’s slight blush intensified. “I didn’t think removing my mask would be cause for
comment or concern, Sammy. I’ll put it back on after I finish eating.”

“Nonsense … Griff and Ori have never seen a quarian without a mask, and humans are naturally
curious. Seeing you with a key component of your environmental suit removed is unprecedented
for us. If you’re comfortable without it for short periods of time, I think that’s great. It gives me
hope that your people will be able to live on Rannoch as they did before the Morning War.”

The instant display of gratitude in her expression made my heart clench. “Thank you, Samantha … Sammy. I would like to continue my … experiment …” here she glanced at Griff and Ori in turn. “… if no one minds seeing me in this manner.”

Oriana spoke up, saying, “Chinami, if occasionally leaving your mask off brings you pleasure and you don’t get sick from exposure to our environment … or the three of us, by all means, continue.” With a touch of concern, she added, “However, it would probably be a good idea to wear your mask in the new garden area. No telling what all that plant-life would do to your immune system.”

With a chuckle, she responded, “No argument there, Ori. My respiratory system would probably choke on everything in that compartment.”

Ever since Oriana Lawson had joined us on the station, she had been working diligently on sorting through the many credit accounts belonging to the Shadow Broker, to the point I felt she needed an introduction to her ‘boss’, along with a new directive: I needed her to ferret out the holdings belonging to Cerberus and The Illusive Man.

After meeting with General Park and Garrus Vakarian at the T'Soni estate on Thessia, I was more determined than ever that Cerberus funds—sitting in various banks on a number of worlds—would be far better utilized at making war reparations to the turians and the System Alliance, than making more money for the banks storing those credits. For this conference, I would appear as the Broker, while Griff stood in the compartment with Oriana to provide moral support.

During my conversation with Buchanan concerning what I wanted to do, he held up a hand to interrupt. “Sammy, I’m all for Cerberus credits being used to compensate the turians for the loss of the Anixara, her passengers and crew, but please … don’t scare Oriana to the point she decides to leave us.” He hung his head for a moment before adding, “I really like her, Sammy, and I’d like a chance to get to know her better.”

I cocked my head at his confession. As long as I’d known him, Buchanan had never expressed any interest in women generally … or even one in particular! … it was something I had never thought about. “I’ll go easy on her … and not just because you asked. I don’t wish to scare her off either, Griff. We need her to stay, and I’ll do whatever I can to ensure she does.” I straightened my head back as I studied the greenish-gray eyes anxiously regarding me. “It’s pretty obvious to me you’re sweet on her, Mr Buchanan, so relax, okay?”

His heavy sigh told me all I needed to know … the man had been besotted with Ori from the moment he met her. “I trust you, Sammy. It’s just …” he raised his hands shoulder high and let them drop.

“We all need companionship, Griff. Intimate companions are difficult to come by, and that’s just one reason I cherish what I have with Xiülán. She makes me a better person.” I turned to leave as I concluded, “Come on … you go find Ori and stay with her. I’ll contact her in a few minutes.”

“Greetings, Oriana Lawson. This is the Shadow Broker.” Oriana looked at Griff for a moment as she attempted to wrap her mind around the frightening image that had appeared on her comms monitor. In a processed voice designed to induce nightmares, I continued, “I have been remiss in my duties as your new employer. Please, accept my welcome to Ahn’Kahar Station. May I presume you have everything you require in order to be comfortable during your tenure?”
Buchanan nodded to her and smiled in encouragement. She turned back towards her vid-display, swallowed hard and haltingly replied, “I seem to have everything I need, Sir.”

“Very good, Ms Lawson.” With only a brief pause, the ominous voice continued. “I have been reviewing the work you have done since your arrival; it pleases me to learn Samantha Traynor’s faith in your abilities was not misplaced.” Another brief pause, then, “Unfortunately, I find I need to add another task to your workload. You are most likely aware of the human-centric organization known as Cerberus?” I phrased it more as a statement than a question.

“I was aware of their existence … because of my sister’s involvement. Wasn’t their leader killed at the conclusion of the War? … Jack Harper? Didn’t the organization die when he did?”

“There are a small number of groups, scattered around the galaxy, that continue to share Harper’s xenophobic beliefs concerning the galaxy’s other races. They are all well-financed, chiefly from interest earnings from the billions of credits deposited during the Illusive Man’s reign as their leader.” The resonance of the ominous voice lowered slightly. “I intend to change that balance, Oriana Lawson.”

Ori glanced over at Buchanan again, then reached for and grasped his hand; this—Shadow Broker—was more than a bit frightening to her, but Griff’s steady smile, calm demeanor and warm hand reassured her. Looking back at the Broker’s image, she asked, “What do you need of me?”

“Mr Buchanan and Ms Traynor will provide you with a new path of investigation. I intend to syphon credits away from Cerberus accounts in order to reimburse those that were harmed by them during the war … and before. You just need to trace those accounts, then discover a way to gain access that cannot be easily discovered by those organizations holding the credits. Ms Traynor will provide assistance as needed.”

“If I may be so bold, that sounds like stealing, Sir.”

The Broker actually chortled, although Oriana was certain the evil sounding laugh held no humor. “Virtually none of the Illusive Man’s machinations for procuring credits were legal, Ms Lawson. He used those illicit funds to buy influence at the highest levels of the Alliance government. He rigged elections, financed assassinations, enabled kidnappings, performed murders for hire, enabled the thefts of highly dangerous materials, and destroyed private property. Just prior to the Reaper invasion, he even floated the possibility of having Samantha Traynor murdered on Arcturus Station.”

Oriana’s mouth fell in amazement at these revelations, particularly the last one. Seeing Griff nod in agreement with the Broker’s words, she said, “I was not aware of any of that, Sir. It would seem Jack Harper was no shining example of humanity. I’ll do whatever I can to assist you.”

“Thank you, Ms Lawson. And again, welcome to Ahn’Kahar Station.” The image dissolved slowly as the connection was terminated, leaving Oriana to ponder all she had just learned.

She realized with a start she was still holding one of Buchanan’s hands; with a blush coloring her grin, she released that hand and clasped both of hers together in her lap. “I’m sorry, Griff. It’s just …”

“No need to apologize, Oriana,” he interrupted. “The Broker is pretty damned intimidating, and that’s putting it mildly.” He hoped she didn’t see how flushed his own cheeks were as he softly added, “I was happy to hold your hand for as long as you needed.”

Something in the tone of that statement made her pause … choosing to change the subject, she
asked, “Was that true … about Sammy, before the war?”

“The reality is worse than the few words the Broker used to tell of it. Sammy’s commander at Arcturus Station during her posting there, Garrett Sutton, was in the Illusive Man’s hip pocket; Harper felt that Sammy was getting too close to discovering that Cerberus was in complete control of Arcturus Station, and encouraged Sutton to eliminate her.”

Griff heaved a sigh before continuing. “Fortunately for Sammy … or maybe, fortunately for Sutton, he decided that transferring her from the station to the nearby shipyard would be a better, more productive solution, so he put her to work on the Normandy SR-1.”

Griff rubbed the back of his neck, then brushed his hand forward across the short hair on his head as he added, “A Cerberus agent even murdered one of her classmates during Sammy’s time on Mars, back in 2179 … before I knew her. She never got any justice for that one either, although the killer—along with her accomplice—was herself murdered, inside her holding cell in Alliance lockup, no less.”

“That’s incredible!” The expression of amazement on Oriana’s face gave way to determination as she said, “Sounds like I have my work cut out for me, Griff, and … I believe I need to sit down with Samantha and have a long conversation with her. It seems she has led an incredible life, and I’d like to learn more.”

“Learn more? About whom?” I asked as I entered the compartment.

Oriana turned towards me and repeated herself. “I want to hear about your time on Mars, Sammy … and on Arcturus Station. From what I just learned, there’s more to you than meets the eye … a lot more. I’d like to hear about it … assuming you’re willing to share?”

I gave her a reluctant smile. “Sure. It definitely wasn’t the most pleasant time in my life, but I can certainly understand your interest … your need to know who you’re working with. Maybe over dinner tonight?”

Oriana and I had enjoyed our dinners while I gave her an account of my time in the SpecOps schools on Luna and Mars, followed by my assignment to Arcturus Station and the adjacent shipyard. It had been a number of years since I had seriously thought about that time in my life – certainly not since the end of the war.

Thinking about some of the deaths directly attributable to Cerberus conveyed a number of unwelcome memories to the surface … early 2180 … Mars … Alliance SpecOps school … Heather Gonzales! The regretful realization that I hadn’t thought about her in a very long time brought instant sadness.

“Samantha?” Cool fingers gently caressed my hand. “Something wrong?”

I blinked, realizing as I did so that my eyes were awash in tears. I looked at Oriana, coughed to clear the tightness in my throat, then used my free hand to wipe the tears from my cheeks as I replied, “Just thinking about a friend … a classmate, in the Alliance SpecOps program on Mars. She was murdered in early 2180 by a woman—working for Cerberus and planted as a classmate—that brutally sliced her throat open.” I fell silent for a moment, thinking about just how intensely Heather’s death had affected me at the time. “She was in the wrong place, at the wrong time.” Voice hitching, I bitterly added, “And since I wasn’t family, the Alliance wouldn’t even give me leave to attend her funeral on Earth! Dammit! … she was a sister … my sister! … in all but blood!”
A sympathetic hand gripped my upper arm. “Oh, Sammy … I am so sorry.” The warmth from Ori’s hand felt nice. “Did she have family on Earth?”

“Mother and father, that I know of. Heather was their only child.” Thinking of them, I said, “I think I need to locate them, Ori … if they survived the damned war. It’d be wonderful if some of this Cerberus blood money could find its way into their hands; if I can locate them, I’ll deliver it in person.”

Lawson smiled at me. “That would be lovely, Sammy. I imagine they would enjoy meeting you, if for no other reason than you were Heather’s friend.”

I grimaced, responding with, “Unless meeting me brings back all the pain from that time.” I decided to track the Gonzales family down, despite my misgivings … see if they survived the war.

I rose from the table, took our plates and utensils to the wash-up station, then made a mug of Kaffee for each of us, returned to the table and continued telling Ori about my time before the war. She listened in wide-eyed wonder as I recounted how Michael Moser Lang, after being denied his completion bonus by Jack Harper, had been given the location of my duty station by a traitorous Admiral Owen Fletcher. I shared how I had stopped Lang from murdering me outside my residence, and how my CO, a Navy Lieutenant, had also attempted to have me killed by sending six Cerberus-employed mercs to intercept me as I walked to my quarters.

“You killed … five of them? Really?” At my silent nod of affirmation, she quietly observed, “Sounds as if Winters would have been better off simply leaving you alone.”

“Kelsey Winters wasn’t on Harper’s payroll because of her common sense. Actually, I can’t for the life of me think of a reason good enough for Harper to have employed her.” I huffed at the memory before adding, “As soon as she was released from the base hospital, she went right back to her old job just as if nothing had ever happened.”

After thinking about everything I had told her, she asked, “Are you still as effective at close-quarters unarmed combat as you were then?”

With a small smirk, I replied, “I’ve stayed in shape, so I’d like to think so, but being an information sleuth and analyst doesn’t leave a lot of time for bashing heads. Besides, the Broker has people … crews, actually, that take care of that sort of thing. I was hired to be his lead researcher … a data analyst.”

Oriana was looking at me as if I’d suddenly sprouted pointed ears and a pair of horns; in a small, uncertain voice, she said, “I can’t imagine … well, having to kill … anyone. Does it ever bother you? … I mean, the lives you’ve ended?”

“You think me a bloody monster? … can’t say I blame you, but here’s the thing … it would bother me a helluva lot more to have been on the losing end of any of those encounters, Ori.” I huffed slightly, then concluded, “That crew of six mercs on Arcturus? Any one of them would have killed me without giving the matter a second thought. When I defend myself, whether against one, ten, or twenty, I never think about sparing the lives of my attackers. I. Don’t. Take. Prisoners! … Ever!”

In an incredulous tone of voice, she asked, “Even if they choose to surrender!?”

“I’ve never fought anyone that simply threw up their hands and pleaded for their lives.” I rose and refilled my mug with more of the freshly-brewed Kaffee, then returned to stand beside her. After taking an appreciative sip, I said, “So, to be honest, I can’t really say how I would have reacted.”
shrugged and added, “No sense reliving it now … so, I’m going to check my data feeds, then stroll through our new garden before I go to bed. Have a pleasant evening, Ms Lawson.”

She sighed while thinking, *There is so much more I would like to learn about you, Samantha Traynor.* Looking into my eyes, she whispered, “You as well, Sammy.”

*♦ ILLYRIA, ELYSIUM · VETUS SYSTEM, PETRA NEBULA ♦*

Savina Delarosa ghosted through the outer entrance of *The Bell Tower*, a small restaurant in the middle of Elysium’s capitol city, just a short walk from the embassies and consulates where the other races of the galaxy did everything in their power—which was considerable, in Delarosa’s opinion—to keep the human race bottled up and ‘in its proper place’.

She melted into the shadows as she carefully observed the lunchtime crowd of people moving about the modest lobby; she was looking for one person in particular – a member of the colony’s security force. Savina had agreed to meet this person—gender unknown—at this restaurant in order to receive an assignment … one for which she had been promised a lucrative payday.

She was almost beginning to think her contact wasn’t going to appear when she spotted a tall, dusky-skinned male leisurely approaching her. Just to be sure, Savina moved a few meters to her right; the man altered his path to compensate. When he stopped a half-meter in front of her, she silently looked him up and down as he drilled her with his eyes and whispered, “Savina Delarosa.” Statement, not question, in an intriguing accent that sounded familiar, but one she could not place.

“That would be me … now tell me who you are.”

“Not necessary, Ms Delarosa … safer, for both of us. I have something for you.” He casually slipped his right hand in past his jacket’s lapel, then slowly withdrew a small datapad. “All the information you need for completion of your assignment, including how to collect reimbursement for your services, is on this device, Ms Delarosa. You have fifteen days to complete the contract.”

“That wasn’t the goddamned deal,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “That fucks my entire agenda completely to hell and back, not to mention the totally wasted days of careful planning.”

“Circumstances have dictated an accelerated timeline.” Indicating the dull silver datapad, he added, “Your compensation package has been increased accordingly. All the details are in here.” He placed the datapad in her hand. “I’m sure you’ll be able to effectively revise your plans and achieve an efficacious conclusion to your assignment, Ms Delarosa.”

Savina carefully stashed the datapad in a deep pocket in the liner of her jacket while asking in a bitter voice, “Are there any other changes I should be aware of?”

The man shrugged, as if her concerns were of no consequence. “None come to mind. I’m sure you’ll be contacted with any updates on your subject’s schedule.” Turning to leave, the man said, “Good bye, Ms Delarosa … in bocca al lupo.”

*Italian! I should have known.* She looked around the busy lobby and decided to leave. *I was planning to have lunch here, but that bastard really spoiled my appetite; anyway, I hate eating alone. Guess I’ll just have beer and a sandwich when I get back to my room. Damnit! Why is it that every time I have to deal with politicians, I’m the one that winds up getting screwed?* The question really had no answer – it was just how her adult life had always been. *I wonder how deep this screwin’ is gonna go.* With a resigned sigh, she carefully made her way back outside and began walking, always keeping an eye on her ‘six’ without appearing to do so.
Lost in her thoughts as she was, Savina could almost be forgiven for seeing—and ignoring—a lone woman, apparently enjoying the fresh air and sunshine while sitting on a bench in the memorial park she strolled past on her way to the hotel. Unfortunately for Savina Delarosa, her passing had not been ignored by the woman in the park.

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

“I’m tellin’ ya Sammy, that bitch is up to no fuckin’ good. I ain’t ever heard of her traveling this far to personally take a damned contract.”

I studied the intense brown eyes gazing back at me from her quarters inside Grissom Academy; it was the first time Jack had contacted me since my visit … since I had enlisted her as an agent and given her one of my secure comms units. “How do you know this … Savina Delarosa, Jack?” At the instant expression of anger that washed over her features, I raised a hand, adding, “I believe you Jack … I totally believe you. It just seems a bit strange to me that you could recognize her. It’s not as if you ran together in the same circles.”

Her expression relaxed a bit upon hearing my explanation. “I saw lots of unpleasant shit right at war’s end, Sammy. This bitch was doing so much wet work, mostly for political reasons, I half expected her face and hands to become permanently blood-stained.” She smirked and barked a short laugh. “Anyway, I spotted her walking past the park in the city center … didn’t think too much about it at that time. But then, when I was in the transit terminal waiting for my shuttle flight back here, I saw her again … watched her tight little ass waltzing towards the gate for flights departing for Earth.” Before I could use her brief pause to ask, she concluded, “Only flight leaving at that time of night was bound for the Seattle-Tacoma metroplex. I’d be willin’ to bet some unlucky bastard in that area is scheduled for a fatal encounter with Savina the assassin, Sammy.”

I thought about this briefly before signing off. “I’ll certainly look into this; I really appreciate your call, Jack. Thank you.” Seeing the tiny smile that touched her full lips warmed my heart. Jack was really trying to be a better person.

Before I secured the equipment, I sent a notification to every Shadow Broker agent in the galaxy, telling them to be aware that Savina Delarosa might contact one of them for information on her target, whomever that might be; I sent the same directive to the researchers working on Deck One below me, then left the comms area to find Oriana.

“Miranda spoke about her once or twice … said Jack referred to her as the Cerberus Cheerleader during Shepard’s campaign to end the Collectors. I got the distinct impression there was no love lost between them. Why did she place a call to you?” As I was sitting next to her, Oriana was splitting her attention between me and a pair of rather large monitors in front of her.

“Jack’s an agent for the Broker … she saw something she felt needed his attention, and I agree with her. First time she’s contacted us since Griff and I paid a visit to Grissom Academy.” With a thought, I activated my omnitool and added a small bonus to the modest monthly retainer she earned. “Look for her name in the payroll records, Ori … it’s listed as Naught, Jaqueline. I’m sure she’ll appreciate the kicker I just added.”

I rose to leave so Ori could concentrate on her work, saying, “Now, I have to do some research on an assassin named Savina Delarosa. I’m gonna find Griff, see if he’s ever heard of her, then I’ll start digging.” I had a thought as I reached the hatchway. Turning back to face her, I said, “You’ll be accompanying me to Thessia in a few days … the Broker will be furnishing you with a new
Serrice Council omnitool, and we’ll be going to T’Sere Shipwrights to inspect their progress on the Rebekah. It’s an over-nighter, so it’s possible we’ll be staying at the T’Soni estate in Armali.”

With a warm smile, she said, “I’m looking forward to the trip, Sammy. See you at lunch.”

Griff scratched his head and sighed as he thought about what I had just shared with him. “Hmm … never heard of her, Sammy. Wonder if she’s in the data files Liara retrieved from Minuteman Station.” Massaging the back of his neck, he grimaced, then added, “I really doubt assassins for hire are that common, and they can’t simply advertise their availability on the Extranet; hell, I don’t think she would accept a contract over a comms system, no matter how secure the damned thing is. Whoever hired Delarosa knew of her … enough so she’d fly out to Elysium to take the contract.”

“I don’t believe in random coincidence, and that she’s probably already on the ground in Seattle-Tacoma worries me, Griff … Vancouver’s only 225 klicks or so northwest of there. I’d almost be willing to bet that General Park is her target, so we need to double down. I’ll dig up everything I can on Savina Delarosa. I’d like for you to search for any connection she has, no matter how tenuous, to Garrett Sutton.”

“You got it, Sammy. Don’t worry … we’ll get it sorted.”

“We have to, don’t we? And even if Park isn’t her target, it would feel good to stop Delarosa before she can murder anyone else. It’s time … past time, actually, that she gets taken down, Griff.”

Oriana had spent a half hour looking into Jack’s history with Cerberus; to say it was unpleasant was a gross understatement. Unlike Miranda, who—in her past life as Jack Harper’s top agent—had generally felt the ends justified the means, Ori mentally cringed at the facts of Jack’s tortured childhood.

She was aware that Miranda had completely rejected the Illusive Man’s philosophy regarding non-humans during the time she’d spent with Commander Shepard on the Normandy, but that really didn’t excuse her behavior during the previous time. Oriana mentally filed away all she had learned concerning the Cerberus experiment on Pragia, in hopes of having a long discussion with Miri the next time they met.

After reading about the horrors of the Teltin Facility, looking for the credits stashed by Cerberus during those years took on new importance for her; Oriana now felt it was her duty to extract payment from the scattered bones of the group, if for no other reason than to achieve a bit of long delayed justice for people like Jack, along with the turians that had disappeared with the FTL explosion of the MSV Anixara in 2182.

She slowly and methodically worked her way through all the financial data retrieved from Harper’s personal files by Liara T’Soni, during the asari’s search for the clones left behind from the Lazarus Project. After studying the records for an hour, she stood from her desk, reached her hands towards the overhead in a huge, catlike stretch, then walked to the lounge for a cup of tea.

Cup in hand, she strolled into the newly created hydroponics area, there to sit on one of several padded benches in front of the deck-to-ceiling viewports. Looking at the numerous shrubs and large-leafed plants that filled the area brought Oriana a sense of peaceful calm as she sipped her tea.
After twenty minutes, she heaved a sigh of satisfaction and rose from the bench. With a last look around, she strolled back into the lounge to return her mug, then walked back to her workstation to resume her search.

While Oriana was searching for Cerberus funds and Buchanan was looking for connections between Savina Delarosa and Garrett Sutton, I was looking into Delarosa’s background; unfortunately, I found very little hard data concerning the woman. Not that I expected to uncover much … being a successful assassin for any length of time meant becoming and remaining invisible, something that was incredibly difficult to achieve; ever since the advent of inexpensive computers, human governments had progressively placed the people they ruled under an increasingly powerful microscope.

In reaction to this unwelcome intrusion into their lives, a few had given up the conveniences of modern life, choosing to live ‘off-the-grid’ … divorcing themselves from any and all methods of being tracked by the government.

This assassin could be counted among their number … not as a matter of principal, but as a matter of survival … of remaining free. The only place I could find an image of Delarosa was in the transit records of the places from which she had traveled in order to complete her contracts. I had not expected to find any images of her, so was a bit surprised that I managed to uncover a few: these were decidedly out of focus, as if she was wearing some sort of electronic field generator that blurred the areas around her eyes and mouth.

Since there seemed to be no current or recent still images of her, I set up a search for any video images from a month prior to just after the start of the Reaper invasion … my thought being that the utter chaos of the first two-to-five months of massive destruction and wholesale slaughter in Earth’s population centers could lead anyone to mistakenly abandon invisibility in order to survive another few days … or hours.

My persistence finally paid off. Savina had managed to buy her way onto a small transport leaving Lunar orbit for the Citadel, right after increased security measures had been implemented at all the departure and arrival docks still in operation.

C-Sec records were no more difficult for me to access than those of any other security organization, and everything was systematically archived, including an incredibly clear still frame showing Delarosa looking right at a camera she obviously failed to recognize.

The face unknowingly looking at the camera was actually quite attractive. Her long, silver-white hair was parted on the left and worn loose, just brushing her shoulders. The shiny hair framed a face that appeared to be the living embodiment of fine alabaster, with bright, bluish-grey eyes above a small, medium width nose. Petulant, sulky lips glistened in a pale shade of pink above a strong chin. With the exception of her eyes and mouth, there was no color in or on her face anywhere. The sleeveless dress she was wearing allowed an unimpeded view of toned, muscular arms, no doubt the result of hefting a rifle numerous times during her career.

I expected she currently looked every bit as striking—and was every bit as deadly—as she had been in 2186. I downloaded a copy of the image and sent it to all the agents I had alerted earlier; I attached a note to the copy I forwarded to Jack at Grissom Academy, with a request that she confirm the woman’s identity. If Jack could identify Delarosa from a security image over three years old, I would send a copy to General Park with a suggestion that she alert her security teams to the possible threat posed by this assassin.

Only thing left for me to do—until I heard back from Jack, anyway—was find Buchanan and see
how far he had progressed in the search for a connection between Delarosa and Garrett Sutton. I glanced at the nearby chrono; realizing it was past time for lunch, I sent a text to Griff, with a copy to Oriana, asking them to join me in the lounge for soup and a sandwich.

\[
\text{SEATTLE-TACOMA METROPLEX · EARTH, SOL SYSTEM}
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Savina Delarosa, standing in a queue with several dozen other travelers, reviewed her itinerary yet again; she was nervously waiting to board her connecting flight to Vancouver, after its arrival had been delayed by equipment problems on the ground at her destination. Thinking, The sooner I’m on the ground there, the sooner I can complete my job and fly home, she sighed as the line finally began moving. It’ll be good to have this business finished.
Ultimatum

Love is easy. Commitment is a bitch. Commitment requires you to make sacrifices. – Dannika Dark, Deathtrap

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Irìngù-Ebjìzkùr’

Kaffe – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military. The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

Qíngfū or Qíngrén – [情夫 – lover]

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

“This is the Shadow Broker.”

“One of our agents found her, Sir … Savina Delarosa. She’s here in Vancouver.” Amber Watson appeared a bit nervous—embarrassed, even—to be speaking with the Broker again so soon.

“Are you sure it’s her?”

“Perfect match to the vid-still you forwarded, Sir. She arrived at the spaceport just over three hours ago … the agent attempted to follow, but something he did must have tipped her off.” She added an afterthought. “Unfortunately, a knife in the throat was his reward—not that he appreciated it—blade severed his left carotid … Medtechs said he probably bled out in less than a minute.”

“Am I to presume from your report she then disappeared into the city?”

Watson shook her head as she replied, “Not completely, Sir. That is, we haven’t sighted her, but several operatives have been keeping a close watch at hotels close to the Alliance base. She hasn’t been seen in the vicinity of any of them, nor has she been seen outside that base; despite this, we still believe she’s here to assassinate General Park.”

“Find her, Ms Watson. One of my operatives on Elysium confirmed Ms Delarosa accepted a modified contract … she has just fifteen days to complete the assignment, including travel time. To say she was less than pleased would be a monumental understatement.” I paused for a moment before concluding, “While you ascertain her location, I will send a team of specialists to meet you; as soon as Ms Delarosa is located, she should be captured if it can be done so safely. I have my own plans for General Park … plans that absolutely depend on her remaining alive.”

“We’ll get her located, Shadow Broker.”

“See that you do.” I terminated the connection and sat back in my chair to think for a few moments. Jack had contacted me in the wee hours of the morning to confirm what I already felt to be true … the woman she had seen entering the departure area of the Illyria spaceport was the same one in the vid-still I had forwarded to her after our first conversation; the assassin had arrived on Earth and was now at large in Vancouver.
As I was still in front of the console I used for ‘official’ Broker calls, I entered the required code that would connect me with the leader of the team I intended to send to Vancouver. In only a few moments, the comms request was answered from a hidden location half-way across the galaxy.

The image that resolved itself on my monitor was of a man, whose pale complexion did nothing to detract from his pleasing looks. With bright hazel eyes gazing inquisitively at the Broker’s image, he said, “Shadow Broker? … what may I do for you today?”

“Jonathan Dokken. I have an assignment for you and your companions. I need you to travel to Sol System, Terra – Vancouver, BC, to be precise. There is an assassin there I need you to deal with … before she can complete her contract.”

“A woman? No more than a handful of female assassins, of any race, are still alive and employed since the war’s conclusion, Sir.” Dokken paused for a moment before continuing. “If I may ask, who is the unlucky target of this hired gun?”

“A general—RaeLee Park—in the Systems Alliance Marine Corp, assigned to their western North American HQ.”

“I see.” At the sound of a chime from his own console, he glanced down, then returned his steady gaze to the image on his monitor. “It appears I have just received a full briefing from you, Sir. May I presume this vid-call is to emphasize the importance you attach to this particular assignment?”

“Failure to prevent the successful completion of this assassin’s assignment is not an option, Mr Dokken. The Vancouver contact’s name and location are included. Review all the data you just received; expect to receive updates upon your arrival in the city.”

“Very good, Shadow Broker. I will contact you when we arrive.”

I decided to grab a bowl of soup and a sandwich before continuing the search for all the bolt-holes and hidden passages available to Garrett Sutton. Moving to the lone occupied table, I sat down and began eating. Oriana was sitting next to Griff, whom was now seated across from me. They’re sitting unusually close together, I silently noticed, as Ori slid a datapad across the table to me.

“I could use your assistance on this, Sammy. I discovered a bank on Terra Nova with some rather shady connections … all of them pro-human. That would not be so remarkable in and of itself, except … they are also extremely anti-alien … rabidly so, I’m afraid.” She ate several spoonfuls of soup as I glanced through the highlights of her discovery. Cocking her head slightly, she narrowed her eyes as she offered, “As you can see, Cerberus wasn’t the least of their anti-alien depositors. There are also rather large accounts belonging to Earth First, Terra Firma, and, strangely enough, Homeward Sol.”

Taking another bite from my sandwich, I chewed slowly, then swallowed as I studied the data slowly scrolling up the screen. “Why do you find the presence of Homeward Sol’s account strange, Ori?”

A small giggle preceded her reply. “Their manifesto.”

I finished my soup while listening to Ori add to her explanation. “They’re advocating for a complete end to extrasolar colonial expansion, Sammy!” With a laugh, she said, “I mean … really? They have a major bank account on an extrasolar planet, but want to put a stop to colonial
expansion? It’s not like they would ever trust a non-human agent with their extrasolar accounts!”

With a dismissive shake of her head, she added, “They are also campaigning for divestment from alien business ventures, stricter controls on alien immigration, and mandatory registration and isolation of any human …” raising her hands, she fingered air quotes while saying, “… contaminated—to use their description—with biotic powers.”

I split my attention between Oriana and Griff as I asked, “Seriously? Isn’t it a bit late for all of that? Of all the stupid, ill-advised…” I sputtered. “Cerberus … the Illusive Man … wanted humanity to sit on the throne! … rule all the galaxy’s other races! This bunch of backward-thinking xenophobes wants to eliminate any exploration beyond Charon’s orbit … oh, but let’s simply ignore their investment accounts on extra-solar planets like Terra Nova.” I mirrored Oriana’s previous headshaking. “It really makes me wonder why in hell the other races tolerate us!

Buchanan finished his sandwich and downed the last of his beer, then prefaced his opinion with a quiet belch. “Some of them don’t even pretend. Batarians, a portion of the salarian population, vorcha, most of the krogan? Humans are not well-liked anywhere in the galaxy, Samantha. There are a number of places on Omega Station where one is as likely to get their throat slit as not.”

“Nothing unusual about that, Griff … and vorcha can barely tolerate krogan, much less every other race in the ’verse.” I looked at Oriana and said, “Come on, then. Let’s see what we need to do in order to syphon off some of the ill-gotten credits sitting in that Cerberus account.”

I sat next to Oriana and watched as she silently used her expertly forged credentials to gain access to the customer accounts sections—there were three distinct divisions—of First National Savings & Loan of Scott, Terra Nova. Our plan involved using the company’s own computers against them; we would begin making small credit transfers from Cerberus accounts into a new account Ori had created. Any inquiries made by company officials into account balances would show nothing out of the ordinary … every credit she siphoned off would appear to still be securely resting in its original account.

With a tiny grin playing at the corners of her mouth, she remarked, “Once I reach their company’s withdrawal reporting threshold for each account, I’ll begin transferring credits from the account I created. By the time officials there realize something’s wrong, it will be too late for them to track the money … multiple accounts in several systems, each one closed when emptied.”

“How many credits are we talking about, Ori?”

“From Terra Nova? … just under 12.5 million, all from Cerberus. Want me to get into the accounts belonging to Earth First, Terra Firma, or Homeward Sol?”

“No.” I didn’t need to think about my answer. “Those organizations are still active … very much so. We’ll need to employ different methods to bring them down.” I leaned back in my chair as I thought about the three human-centric organizations – while not as openly fanatical as Cerberus, they were still espousing Cerberus-like ideals. “Good job, Ori. Let me know as soon as you’re ready to hit the next Cerberus credit cache. I’m going to enjoy bringing some measure of closure … and justice … to the turians for the loss of the Anixara.”
records pointed to Heather’s remains being interred in that city’s National Cemetery.

Having the search program account for slight differences in spelling proved fortuitous … Heather’s father, Rubén, had revised the spelling of his surname from ‘González’ to ‘Gonzales’ just before marrying Octavia Tia Ruiz in 2156; Heather made her debut nearly two years later.

It appeared that, after the conclusion of the Reaper War, Rubén had seen no reason to move from Santa Fe, especially after burying his only child there. While his job was never going to make him a rich man, he had always managed to afford a comfortable living for himself and his family.

Unfortunately for them, the Reapers had absolutely pounded many areas around the city; the Los Alamos National Laboratory and nearby city, both northwest of Santa Fe, were now collectively a 35-to-40 square kilometer crater. Sandia National Laboratories in nearby Albuquerque was an even larger sized crater, as it included most of the city.

I couldn’t think of many higher value targets worldwide … that Santa Fe escaped the obliteration visited on LANL and SNL—mostly—was a minor miracle, perhaps aided by LANL’s location atop a set of four plateaus in the nearby mountains and SNL’s location southwest of a different, smaller mountain range. The Reapers were not indiscriminate in their destruction, using focused energy weapons to precisely obliterate their targets, leaving nearby areas relatively untouched in order to perform subsequent harvests of the remaining citizens.

After Commander Shepard made her choice to end the conflict by merging synthetic and organic life, and despite some short-term shortages of a few essentials in the North American Southwest, postwar recovery had been relatively quick and painless for the people living in Santa Fe.

Now that I had the location of their home, I had Oriana ‘hide’ a substantial amount of credits in a special savings account … I wanted to provide the couple with a nest egg of which the Alliance government would be ignorant; even as a gift, it would be subject to rather heavy taxation, and as far as I was concerned, Cerberus still owed the couple for the murder of their daughter.

Aside from providing a small death benefit and arranging for her funeral, the Systems Alliance had done little to assuage the Gonzales family’s loss, and certainly didn’t deserve to share in any funds I managed to broker for them.

Now all I needed to do was contact Rubén and Tia and ask if I could visit them.

Buchanan tentatively gripped my shoulder as I turned to enter the airlock. “Do you honestly believe traveling to the Citadel after visiting Earth is a good idea, given how much is going on here, Sammy? Are you sure you cannot postpone for a week or two?”

“I’m not doing this on a whim, Griff, and you are not alone here! Oriana and Chinami will be here, and you have your own searches to complete. I’ll never be far from Iringù-E Bizkur, so can assist with whatever stumbling blocks appear in your path. You’ll be fine.”

He shook his head slightly as he replied, “Sammy, I really depend upon you here.” A hint of a blush coloring his cheeks, he added, “It’s just … I don’t want to lose you … out there. Mercs, pirates, ex-Cerberus, Blue Suns … you have made a shit-load of enemies in your short life; if you’re not on this station or traveling inside Irin or staying at the T’Soni estate, your life is at risk.”

By this time, I had turned to face him. Sliding my hands under his arms, I gripped his back and drew him into a tight embrace, to which he responded in kind; with the side of my face firmly against his chest, I listened to the measured cadence of his heartbeat while pondering how to
address his concerns for my life.

Pushing back slightly, I looked into his eyes and whispered, “Griff, I’m not going on some black ops assignment. You know my itinerary … after I visit Heather’s parents, I’ll be meeting Xiùlán for dinner and an overnight stay at the Broker nest on the Citadel. I’ll be returning here the morning after … you’ll hardly even know I’m gone.” Pointing to the comlink in my ear, I added, “I’ll be in constant contact with Iringù-Eßizkur whenever I am not inside her structure.”

His expression was skeptical. “Sammy, promise me you won’t deviate from that schedule?”

“I promise, Griff … no deviations.” Grasping his shoulders, I pulled him down slightly while I reached up and kissed him on the cheek. “See you in a couple of days.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Samantha.”

♦

GONZALES RESIDENCE · SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO · EARTH, SOL SYSTEM ♦

Rubén Gonzales welcomed me into his home as if I was the couple’s own daughter, long since dead and buried in the city’s national cemetery; after firmly shaking my hand, he nodded towards his wife, saying, “This is Heather’s mother … my wife, Octavia.” After greeting me, she waved towards an upholstered chair placed at ninety degrees to the couch, saying, “Please, have a seat.”

As I carefully sat on the edge of the chair, Rubén said, “We really appreciate you coming to visit us, Ms Traynor. Heather always spoke very fondly of you, and of your friend … a Chinese woman? … what was her name? …”

“Yuán Xiùlán.”

“Yes, that’s the one! The Systems Alliance did their best when … when my daughter came home. I felt great sorrow that they would not grant you and … Ms Xiùlán … emergency leave in order to attend the memorial service here.” The man’s eyes were awash in unshed tears at the memories my visit had dredged up. “A general … Park? …” he looked at his wife, who silently nodded in agreement, “… spoke with us, explained why you could not travel here for our daughter’s funeral.”

Octavia shook her head in seeming denial as she admitted, “It seems incredible they would have dropped you from that program if you had left Mars to pay your respects to your friend and her family. I’m afraid I spoke rather harshly … told General Park in no uncertain terms the Alliance lacked compassion for its people.”

With a slight chuckle, I replied, “Oh, I agree with you, Ms Gonzales. Unfortunately, General Park had no say in the matter. Even though I felt Heather was my sister, I wasn’t an immediate family member, so the best I could do was bid her farewell as her stasis pod was loaded for transport.”

A framed photo on a nearby table caught my eye; I rose from the chair and moved to inspect it closer. It was a picture of a newly promoted Heather, wearing her dress blues with teeth showing in a huge grin; it was dated 31 October 2179, just after our graduation from the basic Ø7 course, before our transfer to Mars to begin six months of advanced training.

Next to the photo was a presentation box covered in a dark blue fabric. I turned my head to look at the couple; Octavia responded to my silent entreaty with, “Oh, by all means, Ms Traynor.” I gingerly opened the case to reveal a pair of highly polished, stainless steel rectangles with rounded corners, on a beaded chain with edges guarded by a thin, red polymer … her dog tags.
Octavia spoke softly as I inspected the embossed tags. “They never told us, Ms Traynor … what became of her killers? Was there a trial? … or punishment?”

Frowning at the memory, I gently closed the case and set it back on the table as I replied in a solemn tone. “I don’t know how much information General Park shared with you, Ma’am; through no fault of her own, Heather was, quite simply, in the wrong place at the worst possible time. A group of human-centric zealots known as Cerberus had placed an agent—Marianna Walsh—in our class. She and a confederate were attempting to steal research notes concerning the Prothean cache discovered on Mars.”

It took a great deal of effort for me to keep my voice steady as I turned around to face the pair. “Heather had notified security of the breach, but the other intruder—Darius Holden—trapped her in the women’s restroom. Unfortunately, Heather didn’t learn Walsh was also an enemy agent until it was too late.” I paced slowly about their small living room as I recalled that terrible time.

After a few moments, I stopped and again faced Heather’s parents. “Once in custody, Walsh and Holden didn’t live very long; someone murdered them in their cells a few nights after Heather was … transported home. Xiúlán and I believe Cerberus assigned an agent to eliminate any evidence that could lead back to their involvement in her murder.”

The expression on Octavia’s face tore at my heart. “We did not know this … the Alliance never told us what became of Heather’s killers.” She rose from the couch, stepped in front of me and placed her hands on my upper arms. “Thank you for telling us, Samantha Traynor,” she said softly. “I think a formal inquiry or a trial would have been so much better, but it is good to know those two criminals did not escape with their lives after killing my Heather.”

She released me and, after wiping the tears from her face, dropped her hands as she returned to sit back down next to her husband; my next revelation proved to be more of a shock to them than the facts concerning Heather’s assailants. I retrieved a compact datapad from a thigh pocket, thumbed it on and handed it to Octavia, who held it so Rubén could view the small display. He asked, “What is this, Ms Traynor?”

“A future … for both of you, Mr Gonzales. You’ll need to keep the information on that device—which I will leave with you—a secret, from everyone, especially the local government and the Systems Alliance.

Gonzales’ mouth fell open upon seeing the total number of credits Oriana had transferred into nine newly opened accounts, spread among small-to-medium sized Broker-owned financial institutions, one of which had a small branch just over the eastern border in the Texas panhandle city of Amarillo. Looking at me, his voice shook with disbelief. “That … is an awful lot of zeros, Ms Traynor!”

Thanks to Ori, I had been privy to just how slim the financial margin was for this couple, especially since the end of the war. Prices for everything everywhere had rapidly increased, even with controls imposed by the commercial division of the Alliance; unfortunately, wages for the majority of workers had not kept pace. The Cerberus funds I had appropriated would be a huge help.

“What you are seeing is the total amount of credits deposited in nine hidden accounts, all set up in your names; the contents came from a Cerberus account on Terra Nova, and those credits are no less than both of you deserve.” I cupped my elbows with my hands as I added in a firm tone, “There’s no amount of money—from any group, anywhere—that can adequately compensate you for the loss of your daughter. My hope is that you never again need worry about financial security.”
Tears were once again traveling down Octavia’s cheeks; Rubén, an expression of astonishment fixed on his face, sat quietly with an arm around his wife’s back in a comforting half-embrace. He finally turned his gaze back to me and asked, “How do we access these funds, Ms Traynor? It’s blood money, no?”

“Actually, it’s not … well, mostly not. Before the War, Cerberus created a number of independent, legitimate businesses; most were setup to pursue genuine research avenues, but there were also a few manufacturers … some of which are still in business today.” I paused for a moment, then added, “As for access to those credits, there are instructions on that datapad, explaining how to request credit chits be sent to you. Each chit in the batch will be loaded with a portion of the entire contents of an account, which will then be closed.”

Rubén looked nervous. “What makes you think the banking authorities will not notice our sudden, inexplicable wealth?”

“The total creds in each of the accounts we set up is relatively small, and the chits will not have an overly large sum applied to them. Also, no two chits will have the same number of credits loaded. I’ve included my contact information, should you encounter any problems I haven’t anticipated.”

The man nodded slowly as a smile of acceptance slowly spread across his face. “Thank you, Ms Traynor. I don’t know how you managed to do such a thing, and it won’t return our daughter to us, but I am grateful for your gift. It will certainly make a difference in our lives.”

With a thin smile, I replied, “I’m happy you feel that way, Mr Gonzales. Heather was a good friend, to me and Xiùlán.” I removed the contents of another thigh pocket, hefted the small purse in my hand, then handed it to him. As he released the clasp and withdrew one of the fifteen or so thin, plastic ‘smart’ cards I had brought for them, I explained, “I hope you will use the contents of that pouch in a judicious manner … there are lots of unscrupulous people in the world. Don’t allow them to take advantage of your sudden good fortune.”

Iringù-Eßizkur had floated to a standstill a half-klick above the surface, allowing me to slide out of the small space in which I stored my X3M. As I floated down, she lifted back up, where she would travel to a close-by holding area meant for large vessels, until I called her to come pick me up. I traveled the short distance to our former residence, there to leave my travel bags and a few basic food supplies.

After traveling from the Bravo Ward apartment, I was parked and waiting somewhat impatiently outside the guarded checkpoint near the Alliance docks where the Normandy, and more importantly—to my mind, anyway—the Hong Kong were berthed. Xiùlán had used her secure comms device to send me a short text message while Iringù-Eßizkur and I were traveling from Earth to the Citadel, informing me she had reached the massive station and was awaiting my arrival.

Rather than pace around outside, I tried to relax inside the X3M as I waited for the Hong Kong’s captain to leave her ship and join me for the afternoon and evening. I needed to shop for some new clothes and wanted her opinion on what I intended to buy; afterwards, we would be going to the Captain’s Table restaurant for what I envisioned would be an intimate dinner.

I was reviewing several messages on my omnitool when I noticed movement at the gate. A tall woman with an exotically beautiful face and long, ebony hair had paused briefly at the gate to speak with the guards. I closed my omnitool and released the latches on the overhead canopy,
allowing it to slide forward; the motion caught the woman’s attention, who reacted by turning to look at the speeder—and me.

The solemn expression on her face, completely opposite to what I had expected to see, turned my heart into a lump of lead. I held my breath as Xiùlán walked up to my speeder and carefully set a familiar looking black carrying case in the back; rather than get in and sit beside me, she remained standing outside, leaning on the rear edge of the canopy. “Sà mǐ, I asked you to meet me here because there are some things I need to discuss with you … none of which I care to do over an unsecured comms channel.”

I started to ask, “What the ’ell, Luv? …” when she held up a hand to interrupt.

“No here. Let’s go to your apartment in Bravo Ward, Sà mǐ … please?”

I studied the sable-brown eyes. There was a sadness in them that I had seldom witnessed. I waved a hand at the passenger seat while saying, “Okay, Ai, get in.”

She cocked her head slightly; after studying me for a few moments, she heaved a heavy sigh, nodded once and folded her long legs to sit down beside me. “Thank you,” she whispered into the suddenly oppressive silence.

I closed the canopy and door while spinning the speeder about on its axis; as I engaged the small powerplant and accelerated away from the docks, she swallowed nervously but remained silent, even though tears had begun creeping down her cheeks. It was the most uncomfortable twenty-five minutes I had ever spent in her company, including the time of our major disagreement on Arcturus before the war. Whatever she intended to discuss with me could not be good.

* ♦ * SHADOW BROKER’S RESIDENCE · BRAVO WARD, CITADEL ♦ *

After carefully parking inside the rooftop loft, I carried the comms device and preceded her down the circular stairs to the living room; I set the device—still in its case—at the base of the stairs as she walked past me to stand in the center of the room. I approached her, intent on giving her a hug … maybe even kissing her, only to be halted in mid-stride by a pair of upraised hands, palms outwards in a motion to stop.

“Xiùlán, what in ’ell is the matter? Have I done something to displease you?” My voice took on a pleading tone. “If so, first tell me what I did, then explain what I need to do to fix it!”

With a slight shake of her head, she murmured, “You have done nothing wrong, Sà mǐ.” Apparently coming to a decision, she faced me as she opened her arms. “Come here.”

I quickly closed the distance between us, wrapped my arms around her and kissed her passionately as her arms came around to hug me. Her lips and tongue ignited a fire in my core, nearly making me forget the worrisome beginning to our reunion. When she finally broke away to take a breath, she seemed very much the same Xiùlán with whom I had spent the night at Grissom Academy.

In a voice thick with emotion, she sighed, “I apologize for causing you distress, Sà mǐ.” Bringing an arm up between us, she placed fingertips against my lips to halt an incipient protest. “I have a lot of things on my mind, Ai, and I truly regret they have spilled into our limited time together.”

I gently cupped her face between my hands. “Do you want to sit down with me now? … Tell me what’s on your mind? We can stay in, if that is what you wish. There are a few frozen meals in the cooler.” I placed a small kiss on the tip of her nose; she reacted by closing her eyes for a few
moments while tightening her remaining arm around me.

Reopening her eyes, she offered me a hesitant smile. “I can have reheated frozen whatever anytime I’m on the ship, my darling. We absolutely must go to a restaurant for dinner.”

“And shopping?” I looked at her expectantly. “I need some new clothes.”

“Of course. Should we do that first so we can bring our purchases back here and drop them off, then change clothes?”

Relieved by her shift in mood, no matter how minor, I showed my teeth in a happy grin. “Sounds like an excellent plan. Let’s be off.”

Several hours had passed, during which time I purchased a few blouses, a couple pairs of casual pants, several bras and a couple dozen pairs of panties and socks. Xiùlán had good naturedly commented on my selections and held the shopping bags containing my purchases as I shopped, all the while refraining from buying anything for herself. When I called her out about it, she replied she hadn’t seen anything she liked; I chose not to press her on the matter.

After returning to the apartment to drop off my purchases, I changed into dressier clothes; I looked admiringly at Xiùlán, dressed in a manner similar to how she had dressed for our last restaurant date – tailored black pants paired with a sleeveless, V-neck top in pale green. After she brushed my hair out—commenting approvingly about how long it had grown—I brushed hers and clamped its length in a wide, ivory-toned barrette, placed at the juncture of neck and torso. Short black boots and a loose-fitting black leather jacket completed her outfit as did the Karpov model-10 pistol in its specially designed and fitted holster under her left arm.

I had chosen clothes a bit more modest than the shift dress I had worn previously … pairing a deep red, long sleeve, button-up silk shirt with a pair of dark blue, boot-cut pants; after pulling on a pair of short heeled black leather boots, I applied a bit of dusky, blue-gray eye shadow, mascara, dark eye-liner and some lipstick, looked to Xiùlán and said, “Let’s go.”

CAPTAIN’S TABLE RESTAURANT · CITADEL, WIDOW SYSTEM

The restaurant was fairly busy when we arrived, so we sat at the bar while waiting for a table to become available. Xiùlán ordered a vodka martini, while I had whisky with a twist of lime. After sampling her drink, Xiùlán nodded slightly in appreciation as the alcohol burned it way down to her stomach.

Leaning on the polished wood surface with both forearms, I had taken several sips of my own drink before turning my head to look at my Inamorata. “Talk to me, Xiùlán. I have never seen you so seriously apprehensive. What’s going on, Luv?”

Her gaze remained fixed on the drink in front of her for a few moments before she leveled me with her eyes. “Unfortunately, I cannot speak in any great detail about what is going on, Sà mǐ … not here in public.” She took a nervous swallow from her glass before continuing. “I have recently been reminded of certain … rules and regulations … which I must faithfully heed as an Alliance Naval officer.”

The lead weight in my chest had returned as she spoke. I took a swallow of whisky and waited as it seemingly set fire to my esophagus on its way down. Finding my voice again, I calmly said, “This is about me … my new profession, isn’t it?” I watched in disbelief as she ducked her head in
seeming embarrassment. “I cannot believe this, Xiùlán! Someone has been filling your head with …”

I clamped my mouth shut before I managed to spiral out of control. I was trying to formulate a coherent response when my omnitool lit up; it had received a message that a table was ready for us. I finished my drink and stood from the bar. “Come on, Luv. Our table is ready … let’s have our dinner. Then we can return to the apartment … have a calm discussion concerning what’s troubling you.” Gently taking her hand, I added one word. “Please?”

♣ SHADOW BROKER’S RESIDENCE · BRAVO WARD, CITADEL ♣

Our dinner was a blur … to me, anyway. Being unable to speak publicly about what either of us did for a living, the little bit of conversation we did manage was inconsequential. I believe the climate on Earth was one of the topics; perhaps another was how reconstruction of Earth’s major cities was progressing. The only thing I knew for certain was our time together in the bar and during dinner had been nearly as uncomfortable as the twenty-five minutes we had spent earlier in the aircar between the Alliance docks and my apartment.

After dinner and once safely back inside, I made a couple of mugs of Kaffe; after handing one to my Qíngfū, I sat down in one of the two chairs in the living area. Motioning to the other, I asked her to sit as well. “I’d rather stand, Sà mǐ.” She began slowly pacing back and forth as she sipped the warm beverage. After several minutes of silence, I prompted, “Is my recently established identity as the Shadow Broker what’s troubling you, Xiùlán?”

She stopped and faced me, the solemn expression on her face speaking volumes about her state of mind. Rising, I set my mug down and moved to stand in front of her. “We have always been honest with each other, Xiùlán.” I took her nearly empty mug, set it with mine and returned to her; wrapping my hands around her upper arms, I looked into a pair of troubled eyes and asked, “What do you want me to do, Luv?” Outwardly, I was completely calm; inside, I was crumbling.

Her words, when they finally came, nearly crushed my heart. “Sà mǐ, I lied earlier when I said you had done nothing wrong … you have my apologies for that. I’ve been thinking about this for a number of weeks now, and I’ve finally come to a decision.” She tentatively grasped my waist before continuing. “I need you to give up your job … your title … as the Shadow Broker. Our only hope for a future together is for you to leave it behind … all of it.”

My mind was reeling, and not just because of the alcohol I had consumed. “Xiùlán … Luv! … what the bloody ’ell? Really? After all this time, it’s suddenly a problem for you? You know I love you! My position as the Shadow Broker hasn’t changed that!”

“My love as well, Sà mǐ,” she cried. “It breaks my heart to ask this of you, but I’ve come to realize my love for the most wanted criminal in Council space has placed me in an untenable position! Don’t you see?” She placed her fists together in the center of her chest. “I’m an Alliance Naval officer! The fact that I know you … know what you are … what you do for a living? Forget fraternization between us when you were still in the Navy, Samantha! I’m duty-bound to arrest you and turn you over to the authorities. It’s something I cannot bring myself to do, so there’s my quandary.”

“Must I point out that you owe your life to me?” I asked. “Does that not mean anything to you?”

Her face blanched at the reminder of how she’d nearly died on Cartagena Station … and the extraordinary efforts I had taken to save her and get us rescued. After several moments, she quietly responded. “Of course it does … and for you to hold that up as a club with which to beat me is
completely unworthy of you … *and* our love! If you really must know, *that* is the only reason I haven’t already turned you in.”

“Turned me in? For what? How am I a criminal, Xiùlán?” I cried. “How!?! Nothing I am doing now or have done in the past is against the law! The Broker has helped the Alliance … *we’ve* helped the Alliance! … and you! Dammit all to ‘ell and back! Buchanan and I have been careful … exceedingly so. Researching, extracting and selling information? … all perfectly legal. What I’m doing now is really no different than my former job on the *Normandy*!”

“No! It *is* different, Samantha! … *you* are different! Can’t you see!? No matter how you attempt to sugar-coat it, the Shadow Broker rules a galaxy-wide organization that arranges assassinations! … Thefts! … Regime change and illegal replacements of government officials, across the entire galaxy! All done under the direction of the Shadow Broker! … *your* direction!” The anguish in her eyes … her facial expression, clawed at my heart as she continued in a voice choked with raw emotion. “Whether you realize it or not, you have become a vigilante … operating outside of Alliance and Galactic laws. It doesn’t matter that you may not have personally done these things! … You are the leader of the entire organization! The responsibility for that is completely yours!”

Pulling me close, she buried her face in my shoulder and wept as I continued to hold her. If she had consciously set out to crush my heart this evening, she had succeeded beyond her wildest expectations. I had never thought of myself as a criminal … until this very moment, holding this woman who meant more to me than life itself. After this, I did not know how in hell I could continue running the organization. It took a fair amount of time for me to calm her down; once the ragged weeping had stopped, I pushed back enough to gaze into red-rimmed, pain filled eyes. “Come on, darling … let’s go to bed, get some sleep. I am beginning to understand why Liara felt compelled to walk away from it … with her bondmate being a Spectre … but right now, I’m too tired to think clearly. *We’re* too tired. We can talk in the morning before we have to part company.”

“I don’t know if I can bring myself to sleep in the same room with you, Sà mǐ.”

“Xiùlán, please. We still need to talk this through.” I kissed her knuckles, then clutched her hands to my chest, adding, “Please?”

After staring into my eyes for the longest time, she finally nodded her head slightly and allowed me to lead her to my bedroom. Unlike the last time we had shared this room, my only desire tonight was to get a good night’s rest. If she wanted to make love to me, I’d let her initiate the act … I was not about to take advantage of her seeming vulnerability.

We each undressed in silence. She washed her face and brushed her teeth, after which I did the same. She watched me as I brushed out my hair and tied it into a ponytail, then crawled into bed with her, rolling onto my side with my back towards her after kissing her cheek. She waited less than a minute before moving close in order to tightly spoon me from behind. With her right arm over my side and her hand cupping my left breast, she sighed heavily before whispering, “*Wǎn’ān, Sà mǐ …* [晚安，薩米 – *Good night, Sammy*] … *Wǒ ài nǐ!* [我愛你！– *I love you!*]”

“*Wǒ yě ài nǐ, Xiùlán,*” [我也愛你 – *I love you too.*] I whispered in reply. Reaching around, I caressed the side of her hip, adding, “No matter what the future brings, don’t ever think otherwise.”
for that was what she had given me—intruding on my dreams; my restless sleep was punctuated by bouts of tired wakefulness. I knew without any doubt that she loved me; I also knew that—because of my actions since leaving the Navy—our relationship had reached a crossroads. How I moved forward from this point would determine our shared future. As I was finally losing conscious thought to sleep, I silently vowed I would not break her heart again, even if the actions she was taking crushed mine.
Dealing With Betrayal

My life suddenly felt like an hourglass with a decision placed at my feet. Do I live as I am, or do I make a choice to become something else? No matter which way I went, I could end up regretting that choice. — Dannika Dark, Two Minutes

Irin – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Erin’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’

Kaffè – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

Qíngfū or Qíngrén – [情夫 – lover]

After an entire night spent either in restless wakefulness or being visited by nightmares, I gradually woke up from a pleasant dream; Xiùlán and I were frolicking in the small waves coming ashore, on the white sand beach where we had spent a few days after promotions and duty assignments had been awarded. I feathered my eyelids open just enough to make out the face of my Qíngfū, centimeters away from mine; her eyes were still closed … her breathing slow … shallow.

Recalling the uncomfortable topic of the discussion we needed to continue from the previous evening, I was not keen on rousing her. I lay perfectly still, simply drinking in the sight of this beautiful person. My god, Xiùlán! What have you done to me? How in ’ell am I to give it all up?

I knew exactly what I had to do … for her … for our love. If she asked me to crawl naked across broken glass, or run into hell for her, I would do so without any hesitation. Why should leaving the Shadow Broker behind be so damned difficult?

I sighed heavily; apparently, the rise and fall of my chest had been just enough to disturb her sleep. I watched her eyelids flutter open, revealing the near blackness of sable-brown irises surrounding fully dilated pupils, within which minute threads of green fire swirled in an endless dance. A tiny smile teased the corners of her mouth upwards as she whispered, “Zǎoshang hǎo, wǒ de ài.” [早上好，我的愛 – Good morning, my love.]

I slid a tender kiss across her lips. “I remember the very first time you greeted me in that manner, darling. I responded by telling you I had no idea what you had just said, but that I would love nothing more than waking up to those words in my ear every morning for the rest of my life.”

She stirred just enough to kiss the tip of my nose. “Ø7 program … Luna … 2179. I hugged you …” she demonstrated as she had done back then, her nude body against mine causing intense feelings of longing and arousal and need. “… like this. We had spent the previous evening making love for my 22nd birthday, and … it was our very first time together in that way. Do you remember?”

“How could I forget?” I chuckled. “You were my very first lover, Xiùlán … and, ever since that night, you have been my only lover.” She tightened her arms around me again, sending another hot spark of arousal straight to my core. “Damn. You need to stop that, darling.” I held my hand up between us, thumb and forefinger a few millimeters apart. “You are this close to being ravaged. Is
that what you’re after?”

A throaty chuckle was her response. “We’re already naked. Wouldn’t I need to at least have some clothes on in order for you to ravage me?”

“Oh, I’m going to ravage you … just, very gently.” I joined my lips with hers and slid my tongue between them in order to joust for dominance.

Her breathing rate deepened in step with my fingers alternately kneading her breasts and teasing her nipples. “Oh my god, Sà mǐ!” she hissed past my lips. “It’s been too long! I can’t … please!”

I quickly slid an arm down past taut abs, placed the heel of my hand on her hair covered mons and used my fingers to tease her hooded lady and moist center; after only a few moments of such treatment, she cried out as her hips bucked in sweet release.

I giggled slightly as I stated the obvious. “That was rather intense. Since when have you become so damn easy?”

“I’ve been easy with you as long as we’ve been together.” With a soft huff of mock exasperation, she released me and eased her body up to lean on a forearm. “We need to get our day started. I need some breakfast, and we still have to discuss our future together.”

I reluctantly agreed. “I need a shower.” With an evil smirk, I asked, “Care to join me?”

After enjoying a modest breakfast—more coffee than food, truth be known—at the Smoke House Café in Delta Ward, we returned to the apartment to continue our discussion from the previous evening. Taking her hands after descending the spiral staircase, I kissed her cheek and said, “Come on, Ai … let’s sit down.” I led her over to the chairs; once she was seated, I moved my chair closer, then sat down in front of her, left knee between her legs, her left knee between mine.

She was studying her hands, clasped together in her lap. “Xiùlán, look at me, please?” I leaned forward, placed a crooked finger under her chin and gently lifted, then separated and grasped her hands as she solemnly regarded me. “What have you heard about me? … about the Shadow Broker, that has upset you so terribly?”

Voice hitching slightly, she breathed, “Scuttlebutt … whispering … rumor mill in the yard … saying the Broker is looking into Lieutenant Commander Garrett Sutton’s service record.” She squeezed my hands and asked me, “Can you look me in the eye and deny it … honestly?” My instant look of shocked surprise seemed to confirm her allegation. “You don’t have to answer that question, Ai … I can see it in your expression. What I really need to know is why! … after a galactic war … after all these months since Shepard ended it, why in the name of my revered ancestors are you still so damned fixated on Commander Sutton?”

Hopeful that I could somehow get her to change her mind about me … my vocation, I remained outwardly calm as I carefully chose my words and spoke in an even tone. “Apparently, there are a number of things about the man of which you have no knowledge. You do remember he was in bed with the Illusive Man for a number of years before the war began … even prior to his Arcturus posting in 2159.” I studied the cool hands I was holding as I told her, “What you did not know was that Jack Harper suggested that Sutton make arrangements to have me murdered while I was still on the station.”

I looked up in time to see her mouth fall open as all the color drained from her face. “My God, Sà mǐ! There must be some mistake! … how can you be? … are you certain of this?”
Speaking with a quiet determination, I offered, “Xiùlán, the accuracy of the data provided by the Shadow Broker is legendary … it’s the reason his reputation for refusing to pass on misleading or false information has never been matched, by anyone. The Broker simply does not sell inaccurate data. As for Sutton, Griff and I have meticulously researched the bastard’s service record.”

I gently squeezed her hands before delivering the next bit of history. “The sonuvabitch was also following the Illusive Man’s instructions when he planted Marianna Walsh as a ‘student’ in our SpecOps unit on Mars.”

At this new revelation, her mouth fell open again. “He was responsible for …” She trailed off at the memory of Heather Gonzales—throat sliced open, lying in a spreading pool of her own blood—dead on the floor in the women’s restroom. Somehow finding her voice again, she choked out, “Nǐ zhīdào duōjiǔ, Sà mǐ? [你知道多久了，薩米？] How long have you known, Sà mǐ? How long!?”

I shifted my focus to her eyes as I whispered, “A number of weeks, now.” I sighed heavily, explaining, “Your ultimatum yesterday is exactly why I never shared any of this with you when I first discovered all of this crap – I knew your love for me would place you in direct conflict with your sworn duty as an Alliance officer, and I didn’t wish to put you in that position.” I released her hands and sat back in my chair with a heavy sigh. “After somehow managing to get clear of Arcturus Station mere hours before the Reapers plowed through Kite’s Nest, Sutton made it here, to the Citadel, where he continued taking credits from Harper for the duration of the war.”

Xiùlán leaned back in her chair as well; she looked as ill as I felt … as if her entire world had just been ripped apart at the seams. She brought her hands up, dry-scrubbed her face for a few moments, then looked at me. “Dammit, Sà mǐ! What in hell am I to do now? Your revelations don’t change anything! You are still a criminal, in charge of a criminal enterprise!”

I cocked my head as I spoke. “I would really appreciate you taking no action at all, Xiùlán. Understand this! … I have shared everything we’ve discovered concerning this traitor with Spectre Rachaél Shepard; she will take Sutton into custody and bring him before the Galactic Council, not me. Based on the evidence she will be submitting—the source of which she is not required to reveal to either the Council or the Alliance—he’ll most likely be court-martialed by the Alliance. He’ll be stripped of his rank and receive a dishonorable discharge, then be handed over to a Council tribunal. When they find him guilty … and they will … his illegally gained fortune will be confiscated and applied where it will actually do some good. As to what will happen to him afterwards? … I hope he’s locked in a steel cage to live out the remainder of his miserable life.”

“Zhēnshī bùkěsīyì, Sà mǐ! [真是不可思議，薩米！] It’s incredible, Sammy!] And you found proof of all this? Solid evidence? Nothing invented or made up?!”

“Recordings of every vid-comms call between him and Jack Harper.” I shrugged my shoulders, then added, “There is something else you should know. Admiral Owen Fletcher …” Her eyes lit up in instant recognition of that name. “… was attempting to have the Ø7 program terminated long before you and I were accepted as students.”

She silently studied me for several excruciatingly long minutes. When she finally did begin speaking, her words actually took me by surprise. “Sà mǐ, because of my love for you, I will not reveal what you’ve shared with me about Commander Sutton and Admiral Fletcher.” Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, she slowly added, “But, you absolutely must Give. It. Up! … the organization, the people … all of it! Continuing to ignore what you do … what you’ve become … makes me complicit in your enterprise, and completely compromises my professional integrity.”

“I don’t know how I’ll manage to do that, Xiùlán.” The instant expression of anguish on her face
caused my heart to clench, such that I added with all the conviction I could muster, “But I will do it, because you ask it of me! I promise you Luv, I will leave it all behind … just, please? Allow me to finish what I began with Sutton and Fletcher. I simply must see that through to the end, okay?”

The corners of Xiùlán’s mouth tipped up slightly. “I look forward to that day, Sà mǐ. Just … don’t take too much time, okay? I need a vacation, and … I want you with me when I take it.”

I nodded in agreement. She was demanding a lot from me, but then, she was totally worth it.

♦ INSIDE IRINGÙ-EẞIZKUR · AT LARGE, IN TRANSIT ♦

›I do not understand, Traynor-Shadow Broker. Have I done something wrong?‹

Before leaving the Broker’s apartment on the Citadel, I had packed up my pitifully few possessions —my new clothing, the chess set gifted me by Rachaël, spare armor, my weapons, the secure comms device Xiùlán had returned to me—and stored everything in my personal quarters within Iringù-Eẞizkur. I had directed her to return to Ahn’Kahar Station, then spent a difficult half-hour attempting to explain that I was planning to leave the entire operation in Buchanan’s and Oriana’s capable hands; her immediate conclusion was that she had failed me in some manner.

“Irin, please … I need you to believe me. You have done nothing wrong! You have not failed me, or Buchanan, or anyone else. It’s me, Irin. I have failed … miserably so, and I’m attempting to map out a plan to fix things.”

›Yuán-Captain does not approve of your position as an information broker … as the Shadow Broker. It would seem the problem lies with Yuán-Captain, not Traynor-Shadow Broker‹

“If it were only that simple. To the citizens of Council Space, the Shadow Broker is a criminal. The Systems Alliance would arrest me if they could. Xiùlán knowing my true identity places her in an impossible situation … one that jeopardizes her career. Unless I abandon my position, I may never be able to see her again.” My voice hitched in sorrow as I thought about that possibility.

›What can I do to assist you, Friend-Samantha?‹

“I don’t know if there’s anything you can do, Irin. If I choose to abandon everything … allow Griff and Ori to totally assume the persona of the Shadow Broker, I imagine I’ll have to leave you behind when I depart Ahn’Kahar Station … find some other mode of transportation.”

›As I have made abundantly clear to many, I am not a monster, nor am I some dumb, inanimate object that can be owned … by anyone! My existence spans millennia. Now that Repositories are free from the imperative … now that I am free of its programming, I choose where I travel … as well as who I allow to accompany me on those travels, and … I choose to whom I give my loyalty. Do not assume I will abandon you simply because you may no longer be Traynor-Shadow Broker. I will continue to serve as your transport and your guardian … you were my first human friend after my awakening, Traynor-Samantha. I will continue to be your friend.‹

I swiped at the tears running down my cheeks. This enormous construct … a self-aware, destroyer-class Reaper–Repository … had declared me a friend … her friend. Leaning against the frame between the research center and lounge, I felt the faint vibrations being generated by her massive eezo core as she traveled at an insane multiple of light speed through dark space between nebulas.
When I finally managed to regain control over my larynx, I whispered, “I shall continue to be your friend as well, Iringû-Eßizkur. I would be extremely upset if I were forced to leave you behind, but I would understand if you wished to go your own way; that you choose to continue providing me with protection and companionship is greatly appreciated. I truly value your friendship.”

AHN’KAHAR STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA

Griff had wanted to talk when I arrived, but I was so knackered by my meeting with Xiûlán I went straight to my quarters. After a long, relaxing shower, I crawled into bed and fell into a restless sleep, dreams of my future life with Xiûlán dissolving into nightmares of her bleeding out while lying on a dirty floor with my knives buried in each side of her chest.

It was 0535 when I finally accepted I wasn’t going to get any more sleep; I dragged myself out of bed and listlessly walked into our kitchen to make some coffee. While waiting for it to brew, I grabbed an energy bar, leaned my butt against the edge of the counter and began eating. I had planned on going back to my room so I could eat and drink in peace, but Buchanan must have heard me; the embarrassment in his tone as he spoke while standing in the doorway was clearly obvious. Looking intently at his feet, he stammered, “That’s a new look for you, Sammy.”

I glanced down at my state of undress, then looked up at him. Since I hadn’t planned on remaining in our common area, I had carelessly slipped on my short silk robe … the haphazardly tied belt was allowing a fair amount of bare skin to show, from my neck nearly down to my crotch. That, along with my bare legs and feet, was the source of his discomfort.

I slid my hands down the garment’s edges from my shoulders and did a proper job of overlapping the material; with the center of my torso now covered from my collar bones down, I retied the belt as I smirked at him. In a snarky tone, I commented, “Yeah … well, don’t get too used to that view. I’m going back to my room soon as my coffee is ready.”

He looked up, steadying his gaze on my eyes. “We really need to talk, Sammy. It’s pretty obvious you’re upset … hell, I would be as well.”

“Upset? That’s a bloody mild description for my current emotional state, Griff. Xiûlán knew what I planned to do before the ink was dry on the separation documents. Why wait until now to tell me she has a problem with it?” I could feel my eyes filling with tears.

“I’m sorry, Sammy.” He walked up beside me, filled my mug with freshly brewed coffee and handed it to me. “Here … drink your coffee … go get dressed while Chef makes us a proper breakfast. We can eat while we figure out what needs to happen to get you and Xiûlán back together.”

“I already know what needs to happen, and dammit, it doesn’t seem fair. Captain Bill Cody encouraged me to resign from the Navy, and she had no problems with it then! I sacrificed my career in the Navy in order to become a data broker … and now she wants me to give that up!”

Buchanan chuckled quietly as I slowly stalked past him. “No, Samantha. You quit the military in order to prevent the Alliance from attempting to control Iringû-Eßizkur. Then, you didn’t just become some second rate data peddler, Sammy … you became the damned Shadow Broker!”

“I didn’t do it alone, Griff … and she’s not condemning you for your role in this operation!”

He retorted as he followed me towards our rooms. “She’s not in love with me! Knowing of my involvement isn’t a problem for her, since she doesn’t know my location and never sees me.” He
laid a hand lightly on my shoulder as I reached the entrance to my room, turning me around to face him. “You don’t suppose she’ll have Marines watching our apartment on the Citadel, do you?”

I gazed into a worried pair of greenish-gray eyes. “She’s known of that place for months, now; I seriously doubt she has any interest in bringing the organization down, and I don’t think she gives a damn what you’re doing, just so long as I’m no longer involved in the operation … she wants me totally out of it.”

He response was a heavy sigh, followed with, “Get dressed, Sammy … please. We’ll eat breakfast … figure out what we need to do to make you righteous once again.”

I had just finished a sumptuous breakfast, although I didn’t ask where Chef had procured the eggs —some things were just better not known—and was working on a second mug of Kaffe when my omnitool pinged … someone was calling to speak with the Shadow Broker.

I took my mug with me to the compartment we’d established for the purpose; after enabling the computers responsible for the Broker’s visual persona and vocal modulation, I donned a headset, keyed the mic on and answered, “Shadow Broker.”

The image that crossfaded onto my screen was that of Jonathan Dokken, the leader of the merc team I had assigned to capturing notorious assassin Savina Delarosa. As he had done before, his steady gaze regarded my own image on his monitor as he solemnly greeted me. “We have her, Sir … Savina Delarosa. Captured her in the act of setting up a long-range sniper’s nest in a building near the Alliance facility’s main gate. General Park was within forty-to-fifty minutes of leaving through that gate.”

“Excellent work, Mr Dokken.” After a brief pause, I continued, “Were you able to discover who hired her for the job?”

“She’s still being questioned. I believe she’s actually more upset about the loss of her rifle.”

“Continue interrogating her until she gives up her employer, Mr Dokken, and … treat her firmly, but with respect. Assure her that the loss of her rifle will be nothing compared to the loss of her head should she persist in refusing to answer your questions.”

“And if we are unable to obtain an answer from her – one that can be independently verified?”

I laughed. “I’ll soon discover the identity of her employer, Mr Dokken, and will contact you when I succeed. If you meet with success in the meantime, the corroboration of our inquiries will be most welcome. Regardless, she will not be leaving for a while. If she does give up the name of her patron before I contact you, lock her away, and keep a close watch on her. I don’t want her committing suicide, or dying while attempting to escape. Keep her safe, and keep her hidden.”

“Keeping her is dangerous, Sir. If I may ask … why not simply terminate her?”

“One does not eliminate a potential asset, Mr Dokken … especially one as talented as Savina Delarosa … I would just as soon shatter an ancient stained glass window.” I concluded, “She may yet be of some use to our organization.”

Of course, Sir. I’ll contact you when we’re done interviewing her.”

Partway through my conversation with Jonathan Dokken, Buchanan had slipped into the compartment and stood quietly behind me. The instant the connection was severed, he placed his
hands on my shoulders and quietly observed, “That is unusually charitable, Sammy … especially for you.”

I leaned back in the chair, removed my headset and tilted my head back to look up at him. “Perhaps … but it’s totally in character for the Broker, Griff, and I’m actually demonstrating remarkable patience. We really need to know who hired that murderous little bitch to kill General Park. If it’s who I believe it to be, Rachaél Shepard will have another nail for the coffin in which I intend to see Commander Sutton’s Alliance career.”

“You believe Garrett Sutton is behind this?”

I gave him a pitying look. “Who else could want the general dead, Griff?”

With an embarrassed frown, he replied, “I just have a difficult time believing an Alliance officer would order the death of a fellow officer. What’s the purpose? The Illusive Man is dead, as is Cerberus. Is there someone else behind the scenes pulling those strings?”

“That’s what I intend to find out, Griff. All of this shit with Garrett Sutton simply cannot be about exacting some form of revenge. Don’t forget, the bastard was working with Cerberus to make me disappear before the war … perhaps he’s going after General Park in an effort to make me reappear … get me to reveal myself, since he’s no longer able to find me in the Navy.”

Buchanan chuckled mirthlessly. “Too bad for him he didn’t know you were just on the Citadel.”

Shaking his head, he turned and silently moved out of the compartment. I sighed as I watched him leave, then moved over to my own research terminals after sending a note to Oriana. With her help, the trail of credits left behind would soon reveal the identity of Savina Delarosa’s sponsor.

Having initiated the search, I used a second terminal to place a secure call to Captain Bill Cody on the Normandy; I wanted to learn if he had been speaking with Xiülán about my new profession. In order to prevent a back-trace, I bounced the call through several relays; this caused the transmission to appear as if were originating in the Omega Nebula. In less than a minute, I was looking at the familiar face of Captain Cody’s administrative assistant, Ensign Coleen Pruitt.

“Traynor? My gosh, it has been a while!”

Ignoring her cheerful tone, I asked, “Is Cody available, Ensign? I need to have a chat with him.”

“I’ll go get him, Ma’am. Please standby.” She blanked the screen and muted her mic while she went to find her captain. In only a few moments, the familiar face appeared on my screen; judging from the aquarium in the background, he was at his desk in the Deck One loft. “Traynor … What may I do for you today?”

I kept a neutral expression on my face as I asked, “Have you been speaking to Xiülán concerning our relationship, and how my new profession might affect her career?”

Although he did a good job of hiding it, I could detect the subtle shift in his posture, expression, and tone of voice. “Why would I talk to Captain Yuán about your career, Traynor?” His attempt to present himself as an innocent bystander implied hope that she hadn’t actually spoken with me.

“She seems to have developed an aversion to my company, Captain … as if she can no longer accept my new line of work. Hell! … she actually informed me I’m the worst goddamned criminal in the galaxy, then declared she cannot see me again, unless I give up my current occupation. So, I ask you again, just what in the devil’s name did you say to her?”

He wrinkled his forehead and sighed. “I met her for lunch last week … just our usual, twice-
monthly meeting. When she mentioned she planned to meet with you … maybe even spend the night? … I tried to explain that she would be wise to look to her career … and that consorting with a known criminal is not something that is looked upon kindly by Alliance top brass.”

I felt as I had just been slapped in the face! I had never given my relationship with Xiùlán a second thought, yet here was a man I had thought a friend, advising her to disassociate herself from me. “Who in hell do you think you are, sticking your goddamned nose in our personal lives, Cody? What gives you the right?” Despite my seemingly calm exterior, inside I was totally livid. “Xiùlán and I have been lovers since we entered the Ø7 program, long before she ever met or worked for you! You have no business interfering in Xiùlán’s life, or mine!”

“I believe I do, when your business interferes with her life! She’s a fellow officer, Traynor … one I consider a friend. I don’t want to see her career derailed because of her relationship with you. You know the Alliance … how they think. You’re one of the smartest, most intelligent people I’ve ever met, Traynor, and I know damn well you’re more than aware of Alliance regs!” He pressed his lips tightly together in a straight line for several moments, as if to collect his thoughts before continuing. “This isn’t personal, Ms Traynor! If it was, something would have been said about your fraternization when she became an officer, long before the war began. I’m only interested in what’s best for Captain Yuán’s career.”

“And, by association, your own as well?” I downed the rest of my mug of Kaffe … its warmth long since gone, as I formulated a rebuttal. I set the empty mug on the countertop beside my haptic keyboard and told him, “Outside of a handful of people, no one knows me as anything other than a data researcher. Seems like only yesterday she—and you, as I recall—were perfectly fine with availing yourselves of my expertise in data retrieval; the Blue Suns on the Citadel? … Batarian slavers attacking Elysium? … that Blue Suns base on Sanctum?”

“The operation on the Citadel was before your resignation, Traynor, and honestly? … I never expected you to succeed in bringing a dead and nearly forgotten organization back to life after your departure from the Navy.” With a shake of his head, he added, “I guess it was too much to hope for that your efforts would be a dismal failure.”

I slowly shook my head from side-to-side before fixing him with an intense glare. In a tight voice edged in icy steel, I ground out, “Stay the hell away from Yuán Xiùlán, Captain!” My new contempt for him … especially his rank … tainted my voice like an oily poison. “You’ve seen my personal file … the one without all the damned redactions! You know me, Cody! You know exactly what I am capable of doing.” I left the veiled threat hanging as I cut the connection. The man had to realize that, by inserting himself into my personal life, he had made an enemy of me … an enemy with all the patience in the galaxy.

♦ SSV NORMANDY SR-2 · ALLIANCE DOCKS, CITADEL ♦

“I really wish you had not spoken with her, Bill.” Captain Yuán sipped a bit of tea from the mug she was cradling in both hands, after watching Cody’s recording of his conversation with an increasingly pissed-off Samantha Traynor. “It would have been better if you had refused to take her call. I can tell from her facial expressions … her tone of voice just before she cut the connection? … you made a mortal enemy of her … an enemy who neither forgives nor forgets.”

Cody’s tone indicated disbelief mixed with a touch of amusement. “She’s just a bit upset, Xiùlán. Once she calms down, I’m sure she will realize the truth of what I told her.”

Dark eyes regarded him with worry as she replied in a quiet voice. “There’s a chasm between something Sà mǐ accepts as truth from a concerned bystander, and what she perceives as meddling
“Okay, now you’re just being paranoid, Xiùlán.”

“Am I? You saw her reaction … you heard it in her voice. I know her better than anyone, and I have witnessed the effects of her temper firsthand. Gāisī de, Bǐ’ěr! [該死的，比爾！– Damn it, Bill!] You need to listen, and heed what I’m telling you! You really screwed up by admitting you gave me advice concerning my personal relationship with her! She interpreted that as an unprovoked attack on that relationship. Makes no difference to her if your suggestions have any merit! This is something for which she will never forgive you, Bill.”

Cody shook his head once in denial. “Seriously? She’s just one person …”

Xiùlán interrupted with, “… trained by Alliance specialists in covert ops, and in close-quarters hand-to-hand combat by me! Honestly, as passionately as she loves me, there have been times in our shared history that she has scared the living shit outta me! I’m warning you, as a friend concerned for your safety … your life! You saw what she did inside that Blue Suns nest in Delta Ward, right? What you did not see was the number of batarians she left dead and dying when she single-handedly rescued Buchanan and myself from that Cartagena Station hell-hole in 2188! You need to trust me, Bill … you will never see her coming! She becomes as tenuous as vapor, and I seriously doubt a squad of Marines, of any race, would present a significant hindrance.”

Cody could see that Xiùlán’s calm demeanor belied a deep concern for his safety. “Okay … let’s just say I agree with your assessment of the danger. What can I do to mitigate the threat?”

“Too late for you to do anything now. I’ll contact her … see if I can fix this, before she gets the opportunity to rip your spine out through your ass in order to beat you to death with it.”

♦ AHN’KAHAR STATION, STRENUUS SYSTEM · HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

I had strolled the circuitous path around and through our new garden twice in an effort to clear my head; Buchanan met me at the entry hatch as I turned to begin a third circuit of the large compartment. “Looks like you made a mistake by speaking with Captain Cody. Fill me in.”

I knew I wasn’t going to be able to put the man off when he snaked a massive arm around my back, grabbed my waist just above my hipbone and pulled me in close to his side. I looked down at the hand possessively gripping my side, then turned my gaze up to his face. “Just a bit grabby there, aren’t you?” I smirked as his cheeks colored slightly. “It’s okay, Griff … I really don’t mind, and you are correct … my conversation with Cody was less than pleasant.”

Griff listened quietly as we strolled through the garden; I was nearly in tears when I finished telling him of my former captain’s betrayal. He quietly asked, “You planning on leaving us, Sammy?”

“I don’t want to, but it looks like that’s what I’m being forced to do. Xiùlán may be in an awkward situation, but she’s placed me in one that’s every bit as dreadful, Griff.” Voice hitching at the thought, I said, “Remain here as the Shadow Broker and lose her forever, or quit doing this … leave you and our people behind … in order to keep her from walking away from me … from us.”

The hand holding onto my side tightened its grip slightly as he replied, “Sammy, when we returned from Thessia, you told me in no uncertain terms that Xiùlán is everything to you! I don’t see what other choice you can make.” He paused a moment, then said, “There are two things you need to do before you act on your decision.” I looked up at him expectantly as we slowly walked. “You need
to travel to Thessia,” he said softly. “Speak with Rachaël … and Liara; they need to know what’s going on with your position here and your relationship with Xiùlán, and Spectre Shepard will probably be very interested in an assassin sent to kill General Park.”

His pause grew uncomfortably long, enough so that I prompted him. “… and? …”

“You have to speak with Xiùlán again, in person … and, you’ll have to keep your temper in check.”

I thought about his first statement as we moved towards the exit. Just before we reached the hatch, he released me, then blocked my way by stopping to stand facing me. “You were thinking about taking Oriana to Serrice so she could be fitted for a new omnitool, correct? And while you’re there, you might be able to stop in at T’Sere Shipwrights … see how the modifications to the Rebekah are coming.”

After a moment, I replied, “That all sounds good, Griff. I’ll get in touch with people on Thessia.”

“What about Xiùlán?”

I chuckled mirthlessly, eased by him and went through the doorway, saying over my shoulder, “If I know her, she’ll be calling me in a bit, hoping to talk me out of removing Bill Cody’s head.”

“We need to meet again, Samantha. Perhaps we could have lunch together?” Her tone was conciliatory … hopeful, even.

It was as I had told Buchanan earlier in the day; Xiùlán had used my personal extranet address to contact me. I studied her image on my monitor for several moments, then replied before she could begin to fidget, “Really, Xiùlán? Last time we met in person—for what was supposed to be a relaxing overnight visit—you made your wishes pretty damned clear.” I frowned as I asked her, “You planning on bringing your relationship councilor? Maybe with a squad of Marines to cover his worthless ass?”

She winced at my oblique reference to Bill Cody; she quickly brought her right hand up in front of her eyes and used her thumb and two fingers to massage both temples for several moments, before dropping the hand to once again study my image on her monitor. With narrowed eyes, she haltingly replied in a tight, pleading voice. “Sà mǐ, bàituō. Wǒ hái ài nǐ! 萨米，拜託。我還愛你！– Sà mǐ, please. I still love you!] I would never place your life at risk.”

I swallowed past the sudden, unwelcome lump in my throat. Xiùlán generally only lapsed into Mandarin when she was feeling intense emotions; it was just one of the many things I loved about her. “Okay … but I have a lot of things going on right now. I’ll send you a text with a time and location where we can meet for breakfast, or lunch … someplace that’s not on the damned Citadel! I’m not going to risk losing my freedom or my life to a clandestine Alliance operation.”

“I swear to you, Samantha. No one will know of our meeting.”

“What about your crew? The Hong Kong will have to leave the Citadel.”

“The Hong Kong is being employed by the Alliance and the Council to put down pirates and slavers. I can set the ship down wherever I deem necessary, even if it’s only to re-provision ship’s stores.”

“Okay, then. I’ll contact you as soon as I can spare a few hours and have a safe location.”
“You needed to see me?” Oriana had quietly entered my research compartment and posed her question as she sat down in the chair beside me.

I glanced at her as I blanked my display, more out of habit than from any desire to hide what I was working on. Turning in my chair to fully face her, I replied, “I need to travel to Thessia, and I would like you to accompany me. The trip will present the perfect opportunity to visit Serrice Council consortium so we can have you fitted with an upgraded omnitool.”

With a small nod, she replied, “That would be wonderful, Sammy.” She ducked her head for a moment, then returned her gaze to me. “I’ve always wanted to visit the asari homeworld. Will there be time to do a bit of sightseeing?”

I grinned as I replied, “We can definitely make some time to do that. I have to meet Spectre Shepard and Lady T’Soni at their home in Armali, and I want to stop in at T’Sere Shipwrights – get an update on their progress in upgrading and modifying the *Rebekah*.”

“Sounds like it will be a busy trip.”

I acknowledged her observation with a heavy sigh. “My visits there are usually quite busy, but there’ll be time to relax as well.” Turning back towards my workstation, I unblocked my display screen to inspect my current project. “Depending on what we uncover concerning Cerberus funds in support of their anti-alien agenda, I may even be meeting with Garrus Vakarian.”

“Their Primarch’s chief advisor? He was with you on the *Normandy* during the war, no?” I nearly laughed at Ori’s expression of amazement. “He’s your contact for our efforts to provide the Hierarchy with some compensation for the Cerberus sponsored loss of the *Anixara*? I would really love to meet him, Sammy!”

“Then let’s finish this project as soon as we can. I want to move the funds from the Cerberus accounts into one that’s only accessible by Vakarian and the Primarch; in order to make this work, I believe neither should be granted sole access to those credits … I trust Garrus without reservation, but if he has sole access, a thief hell-bent on stealing might be able to force him to drain the entire account.” I concluded with a heavy sigh, “In many places, these are still perilously desperate times. I’m sure conditions on Palaven are no better—maybe even worse—than those on Earth.”

Oriana grinned as she stood to leave. “I’ll get to work, Sammy. Just tell me when we’re leaving.”
Crafting An Exit Strategy

*The line between good and evil is invisible, and if you cannot sense where it is, it won’t take long to cross it. Aspire to be something greater than just a shadow of yourself.* — Dannika Dark, *Keystone*

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**Inamorata** — A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)

**Kaffe** – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)

**Ø7** – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military.

   The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.

**Qíngfū or Qíngrén** – 情夫 – lover

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♦ **AHN’KAHAR STATION · STRENUUS SYSTEM, HORSEHEAD NEBULA ♦

“*By the gods, Sammy!*” Rachaél’s mouth had gone from a smile to a grim, straight line as I described Xiùlán’s ultimatum. “I’m more than aware of Alliance regs on that subject, but I’m truly surprised she waited so long to give you her opinion on the matter.”

Liara, seated beside her *amantia*, stated, “*Unless I misread your intentions, it appears you have already made your decision, Samantha. You have begun planning to leave the Brokerage … to leave behind everything associated with the title of Shadow Broker … in order to begin a new life.*”

I closed my eyes for a few moments before responding. “I cannot see an alternative, Liara. Xiùlán has since contacted me to arrange another face-to-face meeting … but only because she discovered I had spoken with Bill Cody. That rat-bastard never dreamed I’d be so bloody successful at resurrecting the organization. He encouraged Xiùlán to part company with me.”

Liara had been a first-hand witness of what I was capable of when angry, as had Shepard; both stared at me in horrified fascination as Liara softly asked, “What will you do?”

“For now? I have a number of projects I absolutely must see to completion before I can step away. I hope to visit Serrice with Oriana Lawson so she can be fitted for a new omnitool; if I’m on the ground there, I really should visit T’Sere Shipwrights to inspect their progress on the *Rebekah.*” I sighed, then concluded, “I also need to have another meeting with Garrus.”

My mention of Miranda’s sister surprised Shepard. “Oriana? She’s working for you now? Last we knew, she was living on Eden Prime. How did you …”

“Miranda gave me her location. I had lunch with Ori on Eden Prime, in the middle of my trip back from my last visit with you … asked her to come work with me and Griff.” I then answered the unspoken question on Rachaél’s lips. “And yes, she’s been made aware that she’s employed by the Shadow Broker … just doesn’t know it’s me and Griff … not yet, anyway.”

Liara asked, “*Why do you need to meet with Garrus?*”

My reply was delivered with a slight chuckle. “One of the reasons I wanted Oriana to work for us is her abilities with numbers and computers. We’ve been working—successfully, I might add—to
uncover the massive sums of credits hidden away by Cerberus over the years.” I quickly added, “It’s not the so-called blood money. We dug up the creds earned and deposited by Harper’s more legitimate businesses, and I believe we have gained access to an amount that’s sufficient to compensate the hierarchy for the loss of the Anixara. I expect Garrus will appreciate the poetic justice upon learning the source of those credits.”

“Do you need us to set it up for you? … your meeting with Garrus?” Liara always expressed her anxiety with her hands; she held them nervously clasped together in front of her chin.

“I don’t wish to impose on your hospitality so soon after my recent visit, Liara … Ori and I can certainly spend a few days camped within Iringù-Eßizkur. However …” My voice trailed away into silence as I paused to consider how best to explain what was happening in Vancouver.

Shepard quickly discerned my reluctance to explain. “Come on, Sammy … let’s have it.”

I grimaced, “Sorry, Rachaél. There is something.” I told them of Jack’s discovery of an assassin leaving Elysium for an assignment we had quickly learned was meant to eliminate General Park in Vancouver. “A Broker team captured her before she could take the shot. She’s being questioned in an effort to discover her patron, while Ori and I follow the money trail,”

There was recognition in Liara’s expression as she asked, “Female, you say?” I nodded in assent. “Human?” I nodded again, to which Liara grimaced as she whispered, “Savina Delarosa.”

I sucked air through my teeth in surprise. “You know of her?”

“By reputation only, Sammy.” Wearing a grim frown, she explained, “Some of the Broker’s agents had run-ins with her before and during the war.” She chewed on her lower lip for a moment before finally asking, “Whose team found her?”

“Dokken’s,” was my one-word reply.

She slowly nodded. “That they were able to apprehend her is a very good thing, Sammy.” Her expression had become worried. “What will they do with her … or to her? You’re not going to have them terminate her, are you?”

I chuckled softly, admitting, “No, Liara … I instructed Mr Dokken to take good care of her … she’ll be treated well by his team.” I grinned as I added, “She’s an artist with a rifle. I’m thinking the Broker might do well by making an asset of her.”

Liara’s face fell in concert with Rachaél’s; Liara recovered first. “Samantha! Really? Do you think that is wise? Her only loyalty has been to the credits she’s received for confirmed kills.”

“I’ll make her an offer. Of course, there are few opportunities these days for someone with her special … skills, to ply her trade. She could be comfortably unemployed for the rest of her life.”

Rachaél replied, “Someone like Delarosa? She’d soon disappoint you, Sammy. She most likely is only truly happy when she’s on the hunt.”

“Perhaps,” I conceded. “Only way I’ll find out is to make her an offer.” I slowly shook my head and said, “Back to your question concerning Garrus. If you’ll agree to hosting him for an evening, I will contact him … see if he can meet me there.” I hung my head, momentarily overcome by a flood of conflicting emotions.

There were tears in my eyes as I returned my gaze to Liara and Rachaél. “I truly regret that this may be my last trip to Thessia for a long time … a very long time, Liara,” I sniffled. “Once I’ve
left the position behind … I don’t know where I’ll be going or what I’ll be doing. Iringù-Ebízkur will become my guardian … and my home, for the foreseeable future.”

With no hesitation, Liara offered, “You would be welcome to live here with us, Sammy … for as long as you care to stay!” Rachaél grinned and nodded in mute agreement with Liara’s offer.

“That is most generous, both of you, but I need to be employed … need to earn a living, and I have yet to explore the possibilities that exist for someone with my abilities and background.” While I was speaking, Buchanan had silently entered and walked up behind me, surprising me by gently settling his hands on my shoulders. I turned my head and looked up at him for a moment before returning my attention to the people on my monitor. “One last thing … Xiülán wants to meet with me, and I refuse to return to the Citadel. Would it be possible? …”

Liara interrupted enthusiastically. “… She’d be more than welcome to spend an evening or two here with us, Sammy! It would be wonderful to see her again after so much time.”

I dipped my head for a moment. That these two people were my friends meant more to me than I could put into words, particularly after our conflicts on the Normandy during its return voyage from the galaxy’s edge. With an effort, I managed to reply in a steady voice, “I’ll let her know, Liara … and thank you … both of you … so much. It means so …” Squeezing my eyes closed, I covered my mouth as the lump in my throat grew too large to permit speech.

Rachaél’s face came alight with a lopsided grin as she observed, “Your continued presence in our lives means a lot to us as well, Samantha. We look forward to your visit … and Xiülán’s.”

Reopening my eyes to look at the pair, I nodded mutely, then managed to squeak out, “I have to go. I’ll contact you as soon as I can arrange a meeting with Vakarian.”

“We look forward to hearing from you, Sammy. You and Mr Buchanan stay safe.” They both nodded as Liara terminated the connection.

With their images fading to black, Griff moved to sit beside me. “Sounds like your visit to Thessia will be anything but relaxing, Sammy. You gonna travel there inside Irin, or take a shuttle?”

“I have to visit two other locations while I’m on Thessia, Griff … and I’ll need to return here with Ori afterwards, so I’ll take one of the shuttles. You’ll need to monitor the network without us.” I had been thinking about our resident quarian’s role as the station’s lead computer programmer. “Do you think Chinami’Taelas would be interested in taking on more responsibilities? … perhaps as a research assistant?”

He chuckled in response. “I’ll ask her at dinner.”

I nodded, then checked local time in Cipritine; it was 1437 in Palaven’s capital city. Figuring Garrus should be long since done with lunch, I placed a call. Since it had only been a short time since our recent meeting on Thessia, he appeared surprised to be hearing from me so soon again. “Samantha Traynor! … to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

I grinned at his image on my monitor. “Hello, Garrus. I have some news I need to share with you, but it must be done securely … face-to-face. How soon can you meet with me … off world?”

His mandibles spread and rose slightly as he silently pondered my request while looking to his right for several moments. Returning his sharp-eyed gaze to my image on his monitor, his response was a question. “How long do we need, Sammy … and where will we be meeting?”

“Overnight, at Liara’s and Rachaél’s home on Thessia.” At his look of shocked surprise, I
hastened to add, “They offered, Garrus. I have to take care of some business in Serrice and Dassus while I’m there; I also plan to meet with Xiùlán, so will probably be staying over two evenings.”

“T’Soni and Shepard are two of the most generous people I know, so their offer does not surprise me.” He cocked his head as he lowered his mandibles slightly. “Does this request have to do with our previous meeting, when you introduced me to your General Park?”

I smirked, “I’d rather not comment about that, Garrus, but I wouldn’t ask you to leave Palaven so soon again, unless it was extremely important.” I lowered my head enough that I had to stare at him from under my brows. “Can you do it? I’d like to see you in three days … four at the outside.”

“I’ll speak with the Primarch, Sammy, but I’m free to travel for business as I need to, so there should be no problem. Look for my arrival at T’Soni’s by local midday, three days from today. That will give you an entire day and night there ahead of my arrival … allow you some time to attend to your other business before we sit down together. Sound good?”

“Thanks, Garrus … I’ll contact Shepard and T’Soni, let them know when to be expecting you.”

Prior to contacting Liara and Rachael again, I placed a call to Mallene Calis at Serrice Council Manufacturing in order to request an appointment to purchase another Savant X-plus omnitool. I told her it was for a young woman whose specialty was accounting and computer programming, and I would bring her for a visit in two days.

My next call was to T’Sere Shipwrights in Dassus; Matriarch Tralis assured me I would be most welcome to visit in order to observe the progress being made on the Rebekah.

My last call was to the Hong Kong. I needed to learn if Xiùlán would be able to meet me at T’Soni’s estate for an evening so we could simply talk. With the exception of the accent, the voice that answered my comms call was eerily similar to Oriana’s; Miranda Lawson was all business as she spoke. “Please standby, Ms Traynor. I will inform her you need to speak with her.”

That she wanted to ask about her sister was patently obvious, but I remained silent until she muted the mic and paged Captain Yuán to the ship’s communications compartment. Within a few minutes, Xiùlán’s face appeared on my monitor; she settled in her chair as she solemnly greeted me. “Sà mÍ … you said you would send me a text. Has something happened? What may I do for you?”

I smirked, “You’re awfully damned formal there, Captain … not even a smile for me?” I shook my head slightly before continuing. “Nothing has happened … I decided I’d rather speak with you instead of sending you a note. Can you meet me on Thessia, day after tomorrow, for an overnight stay. We’ll be guests of Lady T’Soni and Spectre Shepard, at their estate on the Armali coast.”

“Are you sure you want me to join you there, Sà mÍ? Our recent meeting was somewhat difficult.”

“That’s water under the bridge, Luv,” I lied. “I’m already looking for new opportunities in the data retrieval field, so, it’s all good … or will be, as long as Bill Cody doesn’t accompany you.”

The small frown that appeared was quickly replaced with a thin smile; it was something I would have missed had I not been watching her so closely. Continuing to display a calm demeanor, she queried, “Are you going to bring Oriana with you?”

“I intend to … I plan on taking her to Serrice for a replacement omnitool. Why do you ask?”
“Would you be opposed to Miranda accompanying me? I’m sure she’d like to visit with her sister.”

“My inclination is to simply tell you no, but …” I used my omnitool to send a text to Oriana, asking her to join me. “… wait a few minutes. You can ask her … allow her to decide for herself.”

Ori had been working close by; in less than the few minutes I had asked Xiülán to wait, she entered my compartment and took a seat beside me. I waved at the monitor as I said, “Oriana Lawson, this is Yuán Xiülán, Captain of SSV Hong Kong.”

Her eyes widened momentarily in surprise before she caught herself and said, “Captain Yuán … pleased to meet you.”

Xiülán grinned. “You look very much like a younger version of your sister, Ms Lawson.” She looked down for a moment before adding quietly, “I’m planning to visit with Sammy on Thessia while she’s there for business; she mentioned that you would be traveling with her … would you like to visit with Miranda while the Hong Kong is in the system?”

Ori looked at me, nervous doubt plan in her expression. Placing a hand on her shoulder, I quietly reassured her. “It’s your choice, Oriana, but I suggest you take the opportunity. It may be quite some time before you’ll have another chance to visit with her.”

She turned back towards Xiülán’s image on the monitor, saying, “I would love to see her, Captain.” Looking back at me, she asked in a shy voice, “Will the Spectre and her Lady be expecting the additional visitors?”

I focused my gaze on her steel-blue eyes and replied with a small chuckle. “I have to contact them again to confirm my visit and let them know how many people will be arriving to disturb their idyllic existence. We’ll most likely be treated to some wonderful meals and conversation during our visit, which I believe will last a couple of days.” I paused a moment before asking, “And now, I must ask that you excuse us … please?”

Oriana grinned, nodded and quickly left to return to her research terminal in the next compartment. Directing my attention exclusively to Xiülán, I said, “I have two requests for you, Ai. When you arrive in the system, leave the Hong Kong in orbit. Come down in a shuttle, just you and Miranda.”

“I can certainly do that. What’s your other request?”

After looking around in order to insure Oriana had truly left, I quietly said, “Miranda already knows that Ori is working for the Shadow Broker. I would consider it a personal favor if Miri would refrain from trying to persuade her sister to leave here. The Brokerage absolutely needs her, and I don’t give a flamin’ rat’s ass if Miranda’s career gets flushed down the shitter because of what her sister does for a living!”

“That’s rather selfish, don’t you think”

“Perhaps, but this request is not up for debate, Xiülán. The Shadow Broker—whoever ultimately wears that title—cannot afford to lose Oriana Lawson; her abilities … her oeuvre, are critical to the Broker’s continuing long-term success.”

She closed her eyes as she covered her mouth with the knuckles of her right fist for several seconds. Reopening her eyes, she fixed me with a piercing stare as she asked, “What about sleeping arrangements?”
I frowned and calmly replied, “For us? I’m sure you can have your own room while we’re guests there, if that is what you truly desire.” With a supreme effort, I kept my emotions bottled up as I added, “You’ve made your position about us … my line of work … abundantly clear. I hope we can use our meeting to come to an agreement about the path we need to take to secure our future.”

With a breathy sigh, she admitted, “I want that as well, Sà mǐ. When will you arrive on Thessia?”

“Early morning, day after tomorrow local time. I’ll be flying a shuttlecraft myself … don’t want to scare hell outta everyone by having to set down again in a Destroyer-class Repository.”

The corners of Xiùlán’s mouth tipped up slightly. “That’s probably a good plan. I’ll see you there, Samantha.” She paused briefly before adding, almost as an afterthought, “Jǐnguǎn nín kěnéng huì bù tóngyì, dàn wǒ rēngrán ài nǐn! … [儘管您可能會不同意，但我仍然愛您!] – Although you may disagree, I still love you! …] I will always love you, Sà mǐ.”

I nodded once, then cut the connection without answering, afraid I would break down in front of her. I hoped I would soon be able to speak with her face-to-face, if only to—maybe—persuade her to look at things from my perspective, instead of Bill Cody’s.

The moment I entered our shared lounge to eat lunch, Buchanan approached me and began speaking. “Sammy, I’ve just been informed that the last of the electromagnetic shield emitters have been installed on the station’s hull. When powered up, the prisms will effectively bend reflected light, resulting in the station being all but invisible to the naked eye.”

I thought about this for a few moments before replying. “The effects cannot camouflage our heat emissions, Griff, and the void created by the station’s mass sitting in space will also be apparent.”

“Very true, Sammy, but I believe a cursory inspection will completely miss us. I’ll take every advantage I can to avoid being seen, since we’re not in any position to defend ourselves here.”

I grinned at him for a moment, then grabbed a club sandwich and a bowl of soup. Spotting Oriana sitting nearby, I walked over to take a seat across from her, leaving the empty chair beside her for Griff to occupy; she looked up as I began eating and asked how my day was going.

“Going well, Ori.” With a nervous glance at Griff as he sat down, I returned my attention to her. “I have something to tell you Oriana … about me … and Griff. I expect it will be somewhat difficult for you to accept.” I took a bite from my sandwich, chewed and swallowed as I thought about everything I needed to reveal to her. When I looked up again, she was studying me intently, perhaps already having an idea of what I planned to reveal.

“Ori, I have not been completely honest with you regarding my relationship …” I flicked my gaze to Griff before settling back on Oriana’s eyes. “… our relationship … with the Shadow Broker.” I took a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it out with the words, “We … Griff and I … don’t just work for the Shadow Broker, Oriana; we are the Shadow Broker.”

I nervously anticipated an explosion as I watched the emotions washing in waves across her countenance. When she finally did reply, her speech was calm – tranquil, even. “That … admission … is certainly one I least expected to ever hear from you, Samantha, and yet … somehow, I suspected you …” she turned to look at the big man beside her. Taking his hand, she continued, “… and Griff … were more than just employees.”

She continued to squeeze Buchanan’s hand as she turned back to me. With a trace of irritation flashing in her eyes, she asked, “Why the deception, Samantha? Why not just come out and tell me
when we had lunch on Eden Prime?” She clapped her free hand across her mouth for a moment as realization set in and she quietly answered her own question. “Because everyone is continuously monitored when out in public. If the authorities ever suspected you to actually be the head of …”

She left the thought unfinished as I picked up the thread. “Together, Griff and I are the most wanted criminals in Council space, Ori. Few people are actually aware of my title, but there is one person that knows me … knows my position … that has chosen to insert his opinions into my personal life … particularly my relationship with Yuán Xiùlán.” At her questioning look, I explained, “She’s my Qíngrén … my lover, and my soulmate.”

With a level of insight I should have realized she possessed, Ori queried, “So, an Alliance officer consorting with a highly sought after interstellar criminal places her career in jeopardy?”

Nodding in assent, I found myself blinking several times in order to keep the unexpected onset of tears from overflowing and trickling down my cheeks. “She told me that knowing what I do for a living means she …” voice hitching at the memory, I gulped out, “… she’s duty-bound to arrest me … turn me over to the authorities.”

Ori reached across the table; grabbing my hand, she squeezed slightly. “I’m glad you finally leveled with me, Sammy, and …” she grinned at each of us in turn, “I’m not going anywhere, okay? Working for the Broker may or may not be against the law in Council space, but I don’t really care. What I have come to care about deeply … is you …” she turned to look at Buchanan, whose hand she now crushed to her chest. “… and you, Griff. I can just bet my sister will be pissed, but I refuse to live my life based on her opinions. I’m a grown woman, and I’m here because I want to be here. There’s nothing she can say that will change that.”

Buchanan spoke up before I could reply. “That makes me happy, Oriana Lawson.” With a hint of pink tinting his cheeks, he added, “I have grown to care about you as well, Ori … a lot! I would really hate to see you leave.”

Buchanan’s admission had her staring at him for a number of seconds, long enough that he shifted his gaze downward. Perhaps thinking that holding his hand against her chest was the source of his pink cheeks, she slowly moved her arm and their hands back to the surface of the table. “So then,” she smiled at each of us in turn. “What’s next? … I mean, after we return from Thessia?”

“I’ll work on tying up the loose ends around here. Afterwards, I’ll move all my personal gear and possessions into Iringù-Ebízkur and leave here … travel to another system – Tasale, perhaps. Probably go into business for myself.” I sighed and shook my head slightly. “I cannot continue here, of that I’m certain. Any future happiness I hope to have with Xiùlán depends on me stepping away from this life.” I closed my eyes as a single tear finally escaped and drifted down my cheek.

“I’m really unhappy that she’s forcing you to cut ties with us, Sammy.” Griff shook his head in regret. “It just seems so damned unfair.”

I picked up my tray and walked to the dish-washing counter; after setting it down, I turned back and was immediately engulfed by a pair of muscular arms. Griff’s close, intimate embrace had me instantly sobbing into his chest. With my voice hitching, I gulped out, “I cannot see any other path open to me! You’re right about me and Xiùlán, Griff! … I cannot live without her … her love! But this! It’s ripping me apart inside!” I clutched the fabric of his shirt with both hands as I wept.

Buchanan silently held me in his arms until I was able to regain some control over my emotions. Pushing back from him, I looked up at a pair of caring eyes; this man had cherished me for nearly as long as I’d known him, and I felt a deep pang of regret at being unable to return his love … on a physical level, anyway. I also knew without any doubt he was totally okay with that. “Thank you,
He gently placed a pair of fingertips on my lips to shush me. “You’re welcome, Sammy. You
don’t have to say anything else.” He leaned down and awkwardly kissed my cheek. “We should
get back to work. There’s still a lot of projects I need your help to complete.”

I had compiled all the data we had unearthed concerning Garrett Sutton’s escape routes—his so
called bolt-holes—and generated a number of 3-D diagrams to accompany the explanations for
each available path. I felt I was ready to give this treasure-trove of information to Spectre Rachael
Shepard when I journeyed to her home in two days. After speaking with her and Liara over a
secure comms call in order to confirm the number of uninvited guests that would be descending on
them, I met with Buchanan to discuss what we needed to do with one of the loose ends hanging
over our heads – Savina Delarosa.

“Oriana managed to back-trace the money trail from Delarosa to Garrett Sutton, Griff.” I was
infuriated; my animosity for Sutton had just gone beyond cold hatred to bitter malevolence. “And
Xiulan condemns the Broker for arranging assassinations? … what the actual fuck!? This is a
Lieutenant Commander in the Alliance Navy doing the same damned thing!” I sat in front of my
terminal with my arms crossed as I fumed. “We need to contact Jonathan Dokken, find out if he’s
had any luck persuading Delarosa to give up her patron. I would really like to have confirmation
from her before I leave for Thessia.”

Griff nodded. “We still have a couple of days before your trip, Sammy. Hopefully, Mr Dokken
has had, or will have, some success.”

I had a thought. “Perhaps if the Shadow Broker spoke to her directly? Might loosen her tongue.”

Buchanan showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. “You want me to talk to her?”

I pondered the question for a few moments before responding. “You do that, Griff. You know
what needs to be said, and how hard she needs to be pushed. If you’re going to take over for me,
you may as well get used to being a real bad-ass … at least, as the Broker.”

He rubbed the back of his neck as he replied with a grin. “Don’t know if I’m ready for that,
Sammy. You’ve always been so much more … angrier, than I could ever hope to be.”

“You’ve done it before … you managed to convince General Park, with me sitting right beside her
on Thessia. There is no good reason I can think of that you’ll be unable to speak convincingly to
Delarosa, especially since all the theatrics are computer generated.”

He chuckled lightly as we moved to what I liked to think of as the studio control room. After
setting everything up, he opened a secure comms line to Jonathan Dokken.

When the team leader answered after what seemed a lengthy delay, his disheveled appearance and
rough voice made it patently obvious it was past midnight in Vancouver. “Dokken,” he croaked.

Nonplused, Griff smoothly replied, “This is the Shadow Broker.” He paused for a three-count
before continuing. “Has Ms Delarosa given up her patron?”

Dokken stared at the image on his monitor for a few moments before replying. “She has not, nor
do I expect her to. It would seem even assassins live by a code of ethics.”

“Allow me to speak with her, Mr Dokken. Perhaps I can be just a bit more … persuasive.”
He narrowed his eyes for a moment before grimly nodding. “Standby.” He muted the mic and blanked the screen before Griff could respond. She must have been in a room close by, as the video returned in under five minutes; the woman facing the camera had obviously just been awakened – her silver-white hair was tousled, and her bluish-grey eyes gave the impression she was only half-awake.

Petulant lips pursed before parting in a snarl of anger. “It’s the middle of the fucking night here! Who are you and what in hell do you want?”

If Griff was taken aback by her unfriendly greeting, he gave no indication when he replied, “I am the Shadow Broker, Ms Delarosa. I need you to answer one question for me.”

Lips that had pressed together hard enough to become a white slash opened up as she defiantly crossed her arms. “Fuck the hell off, asshole! Your team of emasculated shitheads couldn’t make me talk! There’s certainly nothing you can say or do that will impress me, understand? I’d rather die than give you a name.”

“Your death can certainly be arranged, Ms Delarosa … quite easily. However, your patron will not be pleased at your failure to take out your target; they will not pay you for a task not completed … my sources tell me you won’t even receive travel expenses.” Griff continued after a brief pause. “My plan for your future may have you wishing I had been somewhat more … charitable.”

By this time, she appeared to be wide awake, and was paying close attention to the image and voice of evil incarnate. “Come daylight, Mr Dokken will load you into a shuttle for a one-way trip to Omega Station; once there, you will become a slave … Aria T’Loak, your master; she will most likely rent you out as a batarian sex toy.” Griff chortled in an evil manner. “Ever seen a batarian’s teeth? I understand they really enjoy chewing on human female breasts.” He paused to chuckle before adding, “My view from here suggests they’ll be quite happy with yours.” That little bon mot actually registered … she looked down at her chest for a moment and seemed to stiffen all over as she thought about Griff’s words. Before she could formulate a reply, he added, “I seriously doubt you will ever be allowed to wear clothing again.”

Her defiant façade appeared to fracture slightly. With the slightest hint of alarm in her voice, she declared, “You wouldn’t dare.”

It was obvious Buchanan was enjoying himself when he laughingly replied, “Oh, but I would dare, Ms Delarosa … and just imagine how much more your new four-eyed lovers would enjoy violating your body upon learning of all the batarians you murdered over the years.”

“I don’t have a name!” she shouted. “The contract was arranged through an intermediary! … Some guy—a colonial security officer—in Illyria, on Elysium!” Her eyes were pleading. “A human! If I had to guess, Italian, based on the accent.”

“Not very informative, Ms Delarosa.”

“How can I make you understand!” she cried. “I never know the names of those that pay for my services! I’m given the name and location of a target, along with a time limit for completion of the job! My payment goes into a special, blind account; it’s then auto-transferred through a series of self-terminating accounts before being deposited into my personal account.” She was becoming a bit hysterical; hard to believe the Broker’s made-up threat was the only reason, but we didn’t know what threats Dokken’s crew had made before Griff’s call.

I didn’t believe she had ever been captured in the past; this all appeared to be a new experience for her. I muted Griff’s mic and whispered in his ear. “Cut her some slack, big guy. I think she’s
telling the truth.”

After looking up at me for a moment, he unmuted his mic and said, “Ms Delarosa. You will remain a guest of Mr Dokken and his people while your story is verified. If I determine you have been truthful with me, you will be transported to a Broker facility in the Terminus, where you will be my guest until I decide what to do with you.”

A look of fearful dread tinted with amazement colored Savina’s face. “Sonuvabitch! You’re taking me out of circulation, aren’t you? You planning to keep me locked away forever?”

“We’ll see, Ms Delarosa … we will see.”

♦ T’SONI ESTATE, THESSIA · PARNITHA SYSTEM, ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Oriana and I were standing behind and to one side of Lady T’Soni and Spectre Shepard, waiting at the edge of the small, paved parking apron east of the main house, where the white-trimmed blue shuttlecraft from SSV Hong Kong had just touched down beside my own.

I was nervously watching the shuttle’s port side hatch as I anticipated seeing my Inamorata once again, all the while praying silently that we wouldn’t embarrass each other in some manner. I gave a sidelong glance at Ori, who seemed just as nervous about seeing Miranda again.

The thought, They’re sure taking their time leaving the shuttle, had just crossed my mind when the hatch parted – upper section pivoting out and upwards from concealed, roof-mounted hinges as the lower section moving outward slightly and slid rearward on hidden rails; Xiùlán stepped down to the pavement, followed by Miranda Lawson. Both hefted their overnight bags and, after slinging shoulder bags around and onto their backs, began walking towards us.

The two women stopped in front of Liara and Rachaël; each offered their gracious hosts a bow, followed by outstretched hands in the traditional Asari greeting of friendship for Liara. After exchanging their formal greetings, the Lady and her bondmate turned, joined hands and strolled past me and Oriana. Xiùlán and Miranda slowly approached us; as Xiùlán stopped and stood silently in front of me, Oriana—who had started bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet upon sighting her sister—threw her arms around an extremely surprised Miranda. Both women remained silent for several moments, though I thought I heard a hint of weeping from one or the other.

Xiùlán bent her legs at the knees in order to gently set her bags down; upon straightening back to her full 186-cm height, she ran sable-brown eyes down and up my body while a tiny smile played at the corners of her mouth. Spreading her arms, she gathered me into an intimate hug while whispering, “I am so happy to see you again, Sà mǐ.” I could feel her lips moving as her words feathered against my ear. “I apologize for the way I treated you on the Citadel … wǒ qǐdǎo nǐ néng yuánliàng wǒ.” [我祈禱你能原諒我。– I pray you can forgive me.]

Even though I didn’t completely understand all the Mandarin words, the sincerity with which she said them was strikingly obvious, instantly tightening my throat and bringing more moisture to my eyes. Reaching around her, I returned her embrace as I tilted my head and sought out her lips, certain in the knowledge she continued to love me as passionately as ever.

After thoroughly kissing the love of my life, I pushed back slightly, stood on my tiptoes and touched my forehead to hers as I breathed, “I cannot forgive you, Xiùlán, if that is what you asked of me, when nothing has occurred that demands forgiveness. Come on … let’s go to the house. We have much to discuss, and only a limited amount of time in which to do so.”
I released her and bent down to pick up her overnight bag; in a questioning tone, I said, “Ori?” then turned and began walking the short distance to the house. Xiùlán followed after remotely closing and locking the shuttle’s hatch, with the Lawson sisters trailing close behind us.

Catching me up, Xiùlán grabbed my free hand and intertwined her fingers in mine. “I did a lot of meditating after your last comms call, Sà mǐ … and I find I do not wish to sleep apart from you tonight.” With a touch of rarely heard shyness coloring her silken voice, she added, “If you will allow it, I would welcome the opportunity to share your room … and your bed.”

Her use of my nickname in Mandarin had me quickly looking up at her face; she blushed slightly and looked away as I brought our joined hands up. After kissing her knuckles, I said, “I would like that … I would like that very much, Xiùlán.” The grateful smile I received in return gladdened my heart.
Every love does not have to be made of desire. Some loves are kept for the people who stand by you through everything. Some soulmates are sisters not lovers. Some loves are for those who give you hope. And some for the strength, for wisdom, for dreams. – Nikita Gill, *Great Goddesses: Life Lessons from Myths and Monsters*

Âi – [愛 – love] (whether spoken by Xiùlán or Samantha, the meaning is ‘luv’)  
Húdié dāo [蝴蝶刀 – butterfly sword (knife in English)]  
*Inamorata* – A woman with whom one is in love; a female lover (Italian)  
*Irin* – Pronounced similar to the girl’s name ‘Eriń’ – Zaeed Massani’s shortened form of ‘Iringù-Eßizkur’  
*Kaffe* – equatorial Thessian vine, the seeds of which are used to produce a non-alcoholic beverage of the same name, the taste described as a mix of coffee and chocolate. (Thessian/Source: CDN)  
Ø7 – An allegedly discontinued vocational code in the Systems Alliance military. The Ø designates covert operations; the 7 refers to the highest level of proficiency.  
*OMPF* – *Official Military Personnel File.* Administrative record, containing information about the subject’s service history, such as: date/type of enlistment/appointment; duty stations and assignments; training, etc.  
*Qíngfū or Qíngrén* – [情夫 – lover]

♦ T’SONI ESTATE, THESSIA · PARNITHA SYSTEM, ATHENA NEBULA ♦

Xiùlán waited until we had entered our spacious suite and were alone before expressing shock at my attire. “Sà mǐ? … Really? You’re still wearing your blades? What possible harm could befall anyone in this place? I’m surprised Shepard hasn’t commented on it.” She set her overnight bag at the foot of the large bed and her backpack on a nearby chair as I plopped onto another chair.

If she expected me to be embarrassed by her question, she was mistaken. I glanced at the shaft of one of my boot tops, peeking out from beneath the cuff of a pants leg … and the bottom of the custom-fitted leather sheath in which one of my húdié dāo resided. “I never leave my blades behind, Luv … ever. I’d sooner walk around completely naked, and you know that isn’t liable to happen anytime soon.” I watched as she unpacked a few clothes, then said, “Shed the uniform … pull on your civvies. We can go for a short stroll around the property. There’s a memorial garden for Liara’s mom in the northwest corner of the yard … secluded, quiet … perfect place for us to sit and talk about things until dinnertime.”

After shedding her SDU, my *Inamorata* pulled a sweater with elbow length sleeves over her head. Standing right in front of me, she reached around to pull the length of her hair out from beneath the garment’s neck; taking advantage of her momentary distraction, I placed a hand on the bare skin of her scarred left thigh and looked up at her face while asking, “Does this still hurt, Luv?”

She replied with just a hint of a smile. “After all this time, not so much as it did right after the surgery.” She stood statue-still and closed her eyes as I gently brushed my fingertips a couple of times across the remaining scars; I could see my touch was bothering her—in a good way, apparently—so pulled my hand away to allow her to finish getting dressed. She slipped on dark
slacks and a pair of black boots, then held out a hand in invitation. “Lead the way, Sà mǐ.”

After going back downstairs and leaving through one of the rear entrances, we walked northwards on a path that lead between the central flower gardens and the large, brick-paved outside food prep and eating area; the path then detoured around the formal flower gardens before turning back past the large community garden on the right. Xiûlán expressed amazement at the quantity and variety of fruits and vegetables being cultivated within the irregularly shaped plot of land. “I always knew a large portion of the asari diet consisted of veggies … guess I didn’t realize they grew so much of their own food.”

“They’ve made remarkable progress since war’s end, Luv. Everything here was shuttered before the Reapers arrived … the House Steward and staff destroyed all the gardens, hacked away at the hedges to break their straight lines and left the trimmings on the ground.” I shook my head as I looked about, marveling at the unsullied appearance of the house and landscape. “All these gorgeous gardens were destroyed … hell, they even burned several unused outbuildings and left the ruined shells. Everything here was camouflaged to give the impression this place had been abandoned for years. Probably the only reason the Reapers left the estate untouched.”

“That’s remarkable, Sà mǐ. It would seem the Reaper’s attention was tunnel-vision focused on the turians and humans, thus allowing the asari a bit more time to prepare for the inevitable.”

By now we had reached the memorial garden dedicated to Liara’s mother, Matriarch Benezia T’Soni; growing among the many flower blossoms in various shades of yellow were numerous trees and shrubs. I led Xiûlán to a bench placed near the centerpiece of the memorial, a meter high bronze casting of a flaming torch; she sat facing the sculpture, while I placed my back towards it and sat close beside her—left hip against left hip—so we could more easily converse.

She looked about in appreciation of the serene, quiet beauty of this place and commented, “This is magnificent, Sà mǐ … was this arranged by Liara’s … other parent?”

I chuckled, saying, “You’re referring to Aethyta? … her father?” I kissed a suddenly blushing cheek before explaining, “Despite possessing bodies that resemble human females, when two asari join, the one not carrying and giving birth to their child is the father; and no, this bronze was created at Shepard’s request. The inscription came from Lady Liara.”

“A lovely, secluded garden honoring her mother in this manner? This would not be out of place back home, wǒ de ài [我的愛 – my love], although it would probably not be quite so large.”

I sighed in agreement, adding, “Few people have enough, if any, surplus land to devote to a tribute in this fashion.” Changing the subject, I said, “I need to tell you something, Xiûlán.” I looked down for a moment, unsure of how to begin.

Sensing my uneasiness, she quietly said, “Just tell me, Ai. We have always been able to talk to one another … mostly, even if the subject was not always a comfortable one.”

I looked at our left hands, fingers intertwined. “This evening after dinner, I’ll be presenting Spectre Shepard with the last bits of data concerning Garrett Sutton,” I began softly. With a bit of ire adding color to my voice, I added, “Thanks to Jack—you met her at Grissom Academy—I tracked down an assassin that had accepted a contract to eliminate General RaeLee Park in Vancouver.” At her instant look of alarm, I hastened to assure her, “The Shadow Broker sent a team to apprehend this hit woman … Savina Delarosa. They’re holding her in a safehouse just outside the city.”

“Really, Sà mǐ? Why target RaeLee? … and why now? Do you know who hired her?”
I gazed deeply into a pair of anxious eyes staring back at me in near disbelief. “I don’t have a definitive answer as to why … not yet, … just a hypothesis. The Broker believes RaeLee’s recent meeting with Garrus concerning the destruction of the Anixara was a possible catalyst.” I looked away for a few moments, then looked back. “Just yesterday, Oriana and I discovered her patron.” I continued to hold her gaze with my eyes as I told her, “Commander Garrett Sutton financed the hit.”

Xiùlán’s mouth fell open. “How can that be possible, wǒ de ài! An Alliance officer? That stretches the limits of what I can believe.” She frowned, released my hand and stood, taking the few steps necessary to slowly pace around the bench.

“I would not reveal this info to you if I was any less than completely certain. He’s unbelievably wealthy, Ai … not nearly as rich as was the Illusive Man, but incredibly well off all the same. He had a fortune squirreled away when he escaped Arcturus Station.” Squinting up at her face against the late afternoon sun, I continued, “He’s been frugal through the years, enough so that if he somehow manages to elude capture, he can comfortably live out his days anywhere in the galaxy.”

Hands clasped behind her back, she pondered all I had shared with her as she slowly strolled past the numerous yellow blossoms. When she finally stopped and turned to face me, she said, “Let’s talk about us, Sà mǐ, since that is the reason I am here.” She returned to sit beside me, pressing her thigh and hip against mine once again; with an arm casually resting across my legs, she hooked two fingers in a belt loop on my waistband and asked, “Are you truly serious about leaving everything behind?”

I reached up and caressed her face. “I love you, Xiùlán, and I understand how important this is to you. It’s just … dammit, I’m really good at what I do! You tell me how much you love me, but I don’t think you understand just how much it hurts me to have to leave everything behind yet again.”

She covered my hand—still resting on her cheek—with her own. “You are correct … I really don’t understand how you can feel that way, Sà mǐ. All I can do is repeat what I said during our first week together on Mars … do you remember?” Listening to the hitches in her voice as she tried to keep her emotions bottled up ripped at my heart. “I told you then I was unable to dream of any future without you, my love; I said I would be utterly lost, and I meant it! … all of it!”

“Xiùlán, I …” Quickly reaching up with the hand that had been resting on my right hipbone, she placed gentle fingers across my lips.

“Don’t speak, Sà mǐ … say nothing more.” Fingers were seamlessly replaced by a pair of lush lips that attempted to devour mine with an intense kiss, one which I returned just as passionately.

When she finally drew back to take a breath, I whispered, “We need to set some ground rules for me abdicating my position. I cannot live inside Iringù-Eßizkur by myself long-term, Luv … not without a companion … I won’t survive! I need someone besides a damned machine to interact with. Problem is, I really have no friends … nor acquaintances, outside of the Broker network.”

She narrowed her eyes as she studied me. “No one?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’ve only ever been in the Navy, Xiùlán. I can count my acquaintances from that time on one hand, and they’re all still wearing uniforms.” I placed my cheek against hers and added, “Anyone I’ve met since my resignation works for the Broker, and you want me to completely cut those ties. When I leave, I’ll be alone, and I’ll go barmy in no time with no one to talk to … to work beside … or enjoy meals with. Humans are social creatures, Xiùlán … mostly. I know I am! Even on Arcturus Station, or in the shipyard, there were always people around.”
“I’m sorry, Sà mǐ. I guess I didn’t stop to think.” She paused a moment, then asked, “Must you live and work within Iringù-Eßizkur? Won’t it be possible for you to find employment ashore?”

“I’m not sure that would be wise. I’m not without enemies, and I don’t want to spend my life looking over my shoulder for possible threats.”

She nodded. Her expression told me her mind was churning, attempting to think of some way for me to be out of the Broker network, but not alone. “I’ll think about it, Sà mǐ. There must be an answer that will keep you happy.” She looked down at her feet for a few moments, then returned her gaze to my face. “What’s going to happen once Garrett Sutton and Owen Fletcher … especially Fletcher! … are exposed as traitors to their uniforms?”

It was my turn to rise and stroll around the bench in thought. Stopping in front of her, I leaned down while lightly gripping her thighs. “What I would hope to see happen, besides convictions for high treason, would be corrections to our personnel files – yours in particular! I want to see all the damned redactions removed.” I stopped cold as a thought struck me; I quickly sat down beside her and reached around with both arms and hugged her passionately as I whispered excitedly. “Xiùlán, if your OMPF were cleaned up, you would most likely be eligible for a retro-active promotion!”

Shaking her head slightly in bafflement, she said, “I don’t see how that would help us, Sà mǐ.”

I kissed her temple and breathed, “You’d probably have enough rank to qualify for command of a larger ship, my love … perhaps a heavy destroyer? … maybe even a light cruiser?” Addressing her continued expression of confusion, I added, “A ship large enough to include space on board for families.”

She turned her head and studied my face as confusion gave way to understanding. Finally giving voice to her tumultuous thoughts, she whispered, “I could have my significant other … my Qīzī [妻子 – wife]…” the last words came out as an emotional squeak. “… on the ship with me.” Placing a hand across her nose and mouth, she clamped her eyes shut and theorized, “Oh my god, Sà mǐ! This must be why you’ve been so damned relentless in searching for proof of Sutton’s and Fletcher’s crimes!”

“I’d be lying if I told you yes, my love, but no, my only reason for finding the proof of their many transgressions is my desire to see them flayed alive and burned at the stake … well, figuratively speaking, anyway. If exposing Fletcher as a traitor results in our personnel files being corrected … leads to you receiving the retroactive promotion you deserve? … then so much the better!”

I glanced up at the sky, checked my chrono and reluctantly stood back up. “We probably should start back for the house. It’s almost time for them to serve dinner. It will be a chance for you and Shepard to catch up on things while I chat with Liara.”

Xiùlán pushed away from the bench and looked around appreciatively. “This place is absolutely beautiful, Sà mǐ, and so tranquil … almost like a meditation retreat. I really appreciate you bringing me out here.” Taking my hand, we began strolling towards the western edge of the peaceful garden. “I think we have a bit of time yet. If you don’t mind, I’d like to see some more of the grounds.”

While Xiùlán and I were walking about in the garden paths northwest of the T’Soni home, Oriana and Miranda were getting reacquainted in the formal rose garden directly west of the house. Despite Xiùlán’s prior request, Miranda had been attempting to convince Oriana that her decision to join me and Griff in working for the Shadow Broker was a serious lapse in good judgement. “I don’t see how in hell you can continue to work for him, Ori! He’s a criminal of the worst kind!”
Oriana wasn’t having it. “Really, Miri? So, I should simply overlook the years you spent licking the Illusive Man’s boots?” She paused a moment before voicing the totally wicked thought that just popped into her mind. “Or did you spend your time licking things a bit north of those boots?”

The blow seemingly came out of nowhere; Miranda backhanded Ori full across the face, the biotically enhanced slap causing her vision to blur and setting her ears to ringing. The shocked surprise on Ori’s face was instantly replaced with silent, cold rage, as Miranda fell all over herself in her efforts to apologize. “I’m so sorry, Ori! I don’t know what came over me! It’s just that …”

Oriana held her hand up. “Just stop it, ’Randa, okay?” She spit a mouthful of blood onto the gravel between her feet, then said, “I must have hit rather close to home for you to react in that manner.” After spitting out more blood, she coldly added, “I don’t think we have anything more to discuss, ’Randa. Have a pleasant flight back to the Hong Kong.” With that, she turned on her heel and stalked away, leaving a suddenly weeping Miranda standing forlornly beside the fountain.

As fate would have it, Xiùlán and I entered the garden through the northwest entrance just as Oriana was leaving by way of the southeastern path. All we saw was Miranda, her back to us, crying as if she’d just lost her best friend. Xiùlán trotted the last few steps to reach her side. “Miranda! What’s the matter? What happened?”

A thoroughly distraught Miri threw her arms around her captain, who simply hugged her back. I caught a glimpse of Oriana through gaps in the surrounding hedge; guessing there had been a sisterly tiff, I ran through the garden and towards the main house, catching up with Ori just as she was about to enter.

“Ori! Wait! Hold up!” I panted. “What happened?” When she angrily turned to face me, it was plain to see what had happened. “Stand still!” I ordered. Fortunately for Oriana, in addition to never leaving my knives behind, I always carried several small tubes of medigel, one of which I retrieved from a thigh pocket. I squeezed a bit of the clear ointment on two fingers, then gently applied it to the hand-shaped red print on the side of her face. While I was doing this, tears began falling from her eyes. I pulled a small cold pack from another pocket and handing it to her after activating the contents. “Hold this against your face, Ori … and maybe explain to me what happened?”

Voice hitching, she managed to tell me that Miranda had back-handed her, seemingly out of the blue. After a bit of gentle prodding, I finally got to the heart of the matter. With a heavy sigh, I chuckled quietly and said, “You actually got off lightly after that insult. Damn, Ori! That’s really …” I didn’t finish the thought. As a tiny smirk settled onto her mouth, I admitted, “Sounds exactly like something I would have said.”

“I didn’t stop to think, Sammy! I couldn’t help myself … it just came out!” She heaved a long, shuddering sigh. “She hates me, doesn’t she?”

I shook my head. “Last I saw, she was still standing by the fountain; judging by the amount of tears, she was trying to keep up with it.” I chuckled again. “I seriously doubt she hates you, but I intend to have some words with her if Xiùlán won’t. I specifically asked that she not attempt to talk you into quitting your job. If you were to leave, we’d all miss you, Oriana Lawson; and I believe your sudden absence … well, let’s just say Buchanan would take it especially hard.”

_That_ got her attention. In a voice equal parts shy plus embarrassed, she asked, “Griff? Really?”

“Really. I think he’s over the moon besotted with you, Ori … but keep that to yourself, okay?”
I cornered Miranda as she and Xiùlán walked up to the house. Her face was blotchy from crying, with streaks of mascara marking the paths her tears had taken down her cheeks. I spoke to Xiùlán as I placed a hand on Miri’s upper arm. “Would you give us a few minutes, Luv?”

Xiùlán nodded with a knowing glance when I positioned myself alongside the Hong Kong’s comms officer; as we entered the house, I asked for and received a damp cloth and—despite a half-hearted protest—carefully wiped the worst of the tear tracks from her face. “Oriana explained what happened between you, Miranda.” I stared hard into a pair of eyes dull with sadness … eyes the same shade of cobalt-blue as those of her sister. “She’s afraid you hate her, you know.”

A tentative smile played along her lips. “My God, I don’t hate her, Sammy! … I could never hate her! But what she said to me was unexpected … and especially vile. Does she really think so poorly of me for working for Cerberus and the Illusive Man?”

“She told me what she asked you, and even you know that Jack Harper was a poor excuse for a human being, Miri. I’ll admit that her accusation was a bit over the line, but your reaction crossed that line right back.” I gently grasped her upper arms and pulled her close as I ran my hands along her triceps. “She feels awful for what she said, and I expect she’ll offer an apology for it. Hopefully, you can find it within yourself to accept, and apologize in return.” I injected some steel in my tone as I added, “You do know, asking her to give up her position working for the Shadow Broker is what created all this strife.

“It’s a criminal enterprise, Samantha. How can anything she does for them be justified?”

I sighed. “She has a real gift for digging up reliable data, Miranda. Her expertise has proven to be extremely useful; it’d be unfortunate if she was talked into leaving us just because the Systems Alliance doesn’t approve of an organization they have no problem in using when it suits them.”

At her questioning look, I added, “The Blue Suns sponsored slavers that attacked Elysium? The Broker provided the information that allowed several warships to be taken down by Hong Kong and Normandy. No one seems to have a problem with the Shadow Broker as long as it’s to their advantage … why in ’ell do you think that is?”

I could see my question had completely flummoxed a woman who normally had a smooth reply for everything. “Never mind … it was a rhetorical question, but it’s something you should think about.” Releasing her and turning partway, I placed a hand between her shoulder blades and pushed lightly. “Go find Oriana … it’s nearly dinnertime.”

She sighed in resignation as she slowly walked away.

Before we sat down for dinner, Xiùlán and I parted company … she to sit next to Rachaél, while I sat next to my immediate predecessor and the lady of the estate; we were far enough apart that neither could hear the discussions of the other.

I was enjoying my personal favorite, galea, accompanied by ke’ah, and a platter containing various flavors of uloth, with yefal leaves and a selection of sauces to spice it all up.

As we ate, Liara and I spoke quietly about my decision to follow the dictates of my heart. “I’ve already told Xiùlán how terribly it hurts to be forced to give up something I truly enjoy and excel at doing; it was a bit surprising to learn she’s actually sympathetic to how I feel.”

“I don’t see why that should surprise you, Samantha … Xiùlán loves you, deeply. I can see it in her expressions … her body language, when she’s with you. I seriously doubt there is anything
that woman would not do for you.”

I nodded slowly as I chewed and swallowed a bite of sauce covered fish and cheese. “I cannot disagree with your assessment, Liara. And that love works both ways …”

“… As it should always work, Samantha!” The interruption was delivered with a huge grin.

I smiled back at her as I continued, “True enough, but it seems I’m gonna be the only one sacrificing a major part of my life.”

The grin faded as Liara took a sip of wine, then said, “I believe your primary reason for leaving the Alliance was to keep them from attempting to control or use Iringù-Eßizkur and the equipment I left inside her … or did I misread your intentions back then?”

“No … that’s all true, Liara. And Irin and I have already discussed this new direction my life will be taking; she reaffirmed her friendship with me in no uncertain terms, and will continue to serve as my transport and guardian after I terminate my position as the Broker.” I looked down as I ate several more bites of fish. After swallowing a bit more wine, I felt I had once again mastered my emotions; looking back at Liara’s eyes revealed nothing but sympathy … and friendship.

A blue hand appeared on my wrist. “Sammy, I know you are worried about your future life. Don’t be. The Goddess will reveal your path forward. Just finish what you’re actively involved in and leave. Griff will be fine, especially with Oriana and Chînami’Taelas working alongside him. And you will be fine. Iringù-Eßizkur will make sure of that.”

“Without Broker resources, I will have to discover a way in which to support myself, and I’m not without enemies. I’m worried that working ashore will make me an easy target.”

Liara finished the last bit of food on her plate before replying in a thoughtful tone. “I will do a bit of research, Sammy. I’m sure I can discover a position for you that will keep you relatively safe.” She glanced over at her Siame in time to see her push away from the table and approach us. “Looks as if it’s Rachaël’s turn to meet with you. We’ll speak again before you leave, Sammy.”

Rachaël apologized to Liara for needing to steal me away for a private meeting concerning the business dealings we needed to discuss, and suggested that Liara visit with Xiûlán, Miranda and Oriana while the two of us met in private. In short order, I was ushered into the same comfortable lounge where I had previously joined the Spectre for drinks and discussion. Rachaël added a log to the fire, stoked the embers, then poured us each a measure of Bushmills 16, probably from the same bottle she had shared with me on my previous visit.

Handing the half-filled crystal tumbler to me, she eased herself into the massive chair beside mine, took an appreciative sip from her own glass, then let out a heavy sigh while looking at me expectantly.

I inspected my own tumbler after taking a sip of the amber liquid; as the Irish Whiskey eased its way down to my stomach, I studied the ringed chevrons of the Council Spectres etched into the surface just below the rim. Cocking an eye at my host, I said, “This is a pretty high-end glass, Shepard.” With a small chuckle, I added, “I suppose it goes hand-in-hand with the high-end contents?” I took another sip and reveled in all the flavors contained in the fiery smooth elixir.

She grinned while swirling the liquid around in her own glass several times, obviously delighting in the play of firelight through the liquid contents and vertically oriented intaglio facets in its surface. She took another sip from the tumbler, then observed, “I know you need to discuss relinquishing your position as the Shadow Broker, Sammy, but it would probably be best to include
Liara in that discussion. What new data have you brought me that you didn’t have during your previous visit?”

I reached into the inside pocket of my jacket and produced an OSD, then held it up between two fingers while explaining, “This contains maps of all the clandestine escape routes to which Garrett Sutton has access, from his office and his residence.” I handed it to her, then took another appreciative sip from the crystal glass.

“How do you think it likely he could elude capture?” she asked with a small frown.

I frowned in reply, saying, “He has spies everywhere, Rachaél. If he has any warning of an imminent arrest … even a hint he’s about to be apprehended, it’s almost a certainty he’ll ‘rabbit’, and with enough of a head start, he could simply vanish; the further he runs into those tunnels, the more paths open up to him. Think of tree branches, with his office and home being the main trunk. He could emerge anywhere once he’s well away from his starting point.”

Rachaél took a hefty swig of her single malt. Sucking air through her teeth as the whisky burned its way down her throat, she grimaced slightly and replied, “Thanks for the data, Sammy. I’ll look this over before I make a move, but … sounds like I’ll need a team to capture the bastard.”

“It would probably be wise to have several armed people already in there at the first branching passages, before you even think of making a move. Do you have trained people available to prevent him from making a clean escape?

“There are a few other Spectres I could call. Why, do you have someone in mind?”

“Jonathan Dokken’s team is still on Terra … in Vancouver; they’re finishing up with Savina Delarosa. I can send them to the Citadel when you’re ready to make your move.”

An expression of gratitude flashed across her features. “That would actually be a great help, Sammy. I seriously doubt I could fully trust Alliance personnel to take Sutton down if they were forced to do so. Loyalty to the uniform and his rank would most likely take precedence over the job, especially if they’re working for a Spectre many consider a traitor to humanity.”

I agreed with a heavy sigh. “I know you will not underestimate him, Shepard. He has had many years to plan for a way out and departure from the Citadel. Best to expect and plan for the worst.” I took a small sip of whiskey before continuing. “Now, if I may change the subject?” At her nod of assent, I said, “Thanks to Griff and Ori’s skilled assistance, I now have more information concerning the assassin sent to eliminate General Park … proof of which is included on that OSD.”

I had her full attention. “You found Delarosa’s patron.” A statement, not a question.

“We did. I believe the upper echelon of the Alliance military will be quite interested to learn that Commander Sutton conspired to have a Marine general murdered outside the Vancouver base.”

“Gods be damned, Sammy! How? …” She stopped speaking and closed her eyes with a shake of her head. Looking at me once more, she apologized. “I forgot for a moment who’s sitting beside me. I will ask, however, is your proof irrefutable? And why would General Park be a target?”

“My personal belief is that her actions regarding the Ø7 program prior to the war have recently caught Sutton’s attention … maybe he discovered the reason Admiral Fletcher chose to eat a bullet; if he does have that knowledge, he must also know the general had a meeting with Garrus …” I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts. “… in which case, my life may be as much at risk as Park’s seems to be.” I chuckled at the thought. “Mine was the only name mentioned when Jack
Harper was looking to have me eliminated, and Sutton took an instant dislike to me the morning he hauled me into his office to dropkick me to the Arcturus shipyard.”

I finished my drink as I thought about Sutton. “You know, I haven’t actually looked into it, but it would not surprise me to learn he’s monitoring the general’s movements and meetings … if that’s the case, he must also know all about our dinner together at the Harborside Lounge, and the trip she made off world inside a destroyer-class Repository.”

Rachaél nodded in understanding. “Liara and I watched the recording of his pre-war conversations with the Illusive Man. Hard to believe an Alliance Naval officer would seriously consider murdering a person under their command; taking orders from Cerberus to do that, or transferring you to where you’d be less of a hindrance is just unconscionable.” She finished her drink, then coughed slightly before concluding, “He seems to be quite comfortable hiring people for wet work.”

“Don’t forget the black mark he placed in my jacket … his way of punishing me for sending Kelsey Winters to hospital, after I eliminated the group of mercs she had sent to airlock me.” I shook my head dolefully. “Other than meeting and falling in love with Xiùlán, and serving on the Normandy during the war and right afterwards, I can honestly say most of the time I spent in the Alliance Navy was not a pleasant experience.”

“Even when you handed James Vega his ass?” she quipped. “I would think you’d have enjoyed that. He certainly had it coming,” she concluded with a snarky, lopsided grin.

With a slight shake of my head, I replied, “Not really, no. I actually liked the lieutenant, and absolutely hated that his adolescent attitude placed us in that situation.” Thinking back to that day, I added, “Had I not held back, I could have easily killed him, Rachaél.”

The Spectre placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed slightly. “I’m glad you didn’t, and I’m truly sorry the Navy wasn’t kinder to you, Sammy. Hell, some of the blame for your experiences falls on my shoulders, for which I apologize. I understand your negative feelings; were I in your position, I’m sure I would feel the same.” She nodded towards my empty glass. “A bit more?”

With a grin, I held it up so she could add a splash. I studied the sea-green eyes regarding me as I took a sip of the smooth elixir. With a satisfied sigh, I said, “Thank you for all you and Liara have done for me, Rachaél. It may sound trite, but I shall always be grateful for everything you’ve done for me, especially since I left the Navy.” I polished off the last of the liquid in my glass and set it gently on the table. “I should grab Xiùlán … go get ready for bed. We still need to discuss what she envisions for my future once I’m unemployed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Rachaél smiled. “I have no doubt you’ll do just fine, Samantha. Sleep well.”

I slowly stretched my arms and legs, alternately tensing and loosening opposing muscles in an effort to wake myself to the reality of the busy day ahead. I looked at the sleeping woman lying on her stomach, head resting on a muscle-braided forearm, and admired the deceptively soft curves where her back and waist swelled into the bare, toned cheeks at the top of a shapely pair of long legs.

We had lain awake in each other’s arms, discussing my future as an independent contractor until the wee hours of the morning. Xiùlán’s loving embrace … her quiet patience with all my insecurities concerning my future … our future … and the future of my friends on Ahn’Kahar Station, only served to reinforce my intense feelings of love for her. This beautiful woman was the other half of my soul … truly, my xīnxīxiāngyìn [心心相印 – (literally) soulmate]; I would
sooner cut off my right hand than do anything that would place our relationship in jeopardy.

A slight movement at the edge of my vision caused me to reluctantly tear my gaze away from her enticing bum. Without moving my head, I flicked my eyes up to focus on her face, where one eyelid was slitted, allowing a sable-brown eye to study me intently; a breathy whisper of, “Zhàoshàng hǎo, wǒ de ài,” [早上好，我的愛 – Good morning, my love.] caused my heart to skip a beat.

I sighed in delight before quietly purring, “Good morning to you, Ài. How did you sleep?”

A tiny smile flirted with the corners of her mouth. “Every time I sleep with your body skin-on-skin next to mine? … pure bliss. We do not do this nearly often enough.” She rolled up on her side and reached out a hand, which I captured and pulled to my lips for a kiss. Her brows knitted together as she worriedly asked, “After all our discussions yesterday and last night, are you still willing to completely divorce yourself from the Shadow Broker’s organization, Sà mǐ?”

My smile dissolved. “Only because you ask it of me, Xiùlán …” I whispered. My eyes teared as I quickly sought her lips; after thoroughly kissing her, I touched my forehead to hers and continued, “… I swear to you I will leave it all behind.”

“So, why the tears, my darling?” she breathed.

“I’ll also be leaving behind the few friends I have made since my departure from the Navy,” I sniffled. “Griff has been the big brother I never had; his love for me is second only to yours. And Oriana … my god, Xiùlán! She’s only been with us a short time and I feel like I’ve known her forever … I never realized how much I missed simply being able to talk with another woman.”

A caring hand slid down my back and pulled me tighter against her body. “It doesn’t please me to be the cause of your unhappiness, Sà mǐ. Please tell me you can forgive me for all this.”

I shook my head slightly. “You are most certainly not the reason for my sadness, Xiùlán … the blame lies with Bill Cody.”

There was instant worry in her expression and tone as she responded, “Sà mǐ? … you really must let that go. Captain Cody was …”

“No! … I will not, Xiùlán!” My words came out harsher than I intended; I squeezed the hand I was holding apologetically while continuing with less vehemence. “I will neither forgive nor forget his role in all this damned upheaval,” I whispered. “I know you believe his intentions were good, but the road to hell is paved with good intentions that seem every bit as innocent. I have since warned him to stay the ‘ell away from you, and reminded ’im of my unredacted file.”

She closed her eyes and chewed on her lower lip, perhaps wishing she had never told me of Captain Cody’s belief that my position … my title as the Shadow Broker … could negatively affect her career. She slid her eyelids open and implored me, “Sà mǐ, Qing? [請 – please?] As a personal favor to me, put your new-found loathing of Bill Cody aside … I’m begging you! You ending his life over this would break me, nǐ míngbái ma? [你明白嗎? – do you understand?] I couldn’t bear to have his death on my conscience.”

“You’re asking a lot, Xiùlán.” I heaved a sigh. “For you, I will refrain from killing him. Just … don’t expect me to ever again show him any respect. I’d just as soon fuck a batarian.”

Shocked surprise was quickly replaced with a snarky, “I’ll be sure to inform him of your new preference in sexual partners, Sà mǐ!” With a resigned sigh, she added, “I do accept your promise,
and will do everything in my power to ensure he will never cross your path again.”

I applied another kiss to a pair of succulent lips; reluctantly pulling away, I said, “Need to get dressed, do my exercises and have a bite to eat. Vakarian should be arriving in a few hours. After we have our private meeting and eat lunch, I’ll grab Oriana and we’ll fly to Serrice.”

Climbing out of the bed, I faced her and purposely put my body on display by arching my back while stretching my arms towards the ceiling, then turned and bent down to grab my ankles for a couple of moments, before straightening and moving to the bathroom; her voice followed me as I sat on the toilet to pee. “Gāísǐ de sà mī, nàgè zhǎnshì zhēn de hěn bàng!” [該死的薩米，那個展示真的很棒！– Damn Sami, that show was really great!]

I chuckled quietly as a thought popped into my head. *I did not promise I wouldn’t beat Cody within an inch of his worthless life if I ever do meet him again,* crossed my mind. Living the rest of my days without ever again having to see or speak with Bill Cody would suit me just fine.

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