

Devil's Deals

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Devil's Deals

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Summary

Deals are being made and schemes concocted here as Jacob and Kasumi try to retrieve something precious.

Prelude: The Devils Scheme

Serpent Nebula—Beckenstein System—Donovan Hock's Estate

Donovan Hock scowled as he looked down at the greybox locked in its display case next to the M-12 Locust SMG used to assassinate two presidents. "What have you hidden in there Okuda?" The arms dealer murmured as an aide approached him.

"They're here, Mr. Hock."

"Very well...show them in." Hock commanded, pulling down his jacket as his guests entered. "Ms. Brooks...Ms. Vasir..." the mercenary contractor politely greeted the dark-skinned human and asari Spectre standing before him.

"Have the arrangements been made?" Vasir asked.

"They have." Hock affirmed, "The leaders of the Blue Suns, Eclipse, and Blood Pack are open to an arrangement. For now, their goals align with yours."

"Very good." Agent Brooks responded, "Our employers will be pleased—as will you once you check your account balance."

"And the other item?" Hock inquired, glancing down at the greybox.

"Our mutual friends have agreed to send experts to crack the box." Vasir promised, "Provided you agree to share its contents with them."

"I will do so." The arms merchant affirmed. "So...we have a contract?"

"We do."

A week later at an undisclosed location

"Commander Santiago." The Illusive Man greeted the holographic image of the Blue Suns leader with a slight incline of his head. "It is good to see that you have survived your recent encounter with your former partner."

The mercenary leader snorted, "Too bad he didn't."

"Quite so." The Illusive Man acknowledged, flicking ash from his cigarette, "Thank you for accepting my invitation to meet."

"You've paid for my time." Vido replied, "So, what do you want?"

"I would like to hire your organization for a long-term contract." The Cerberus head responded as he took a draw from his cigarette and exhaled. "One that I think you will find to be most lucrative."

"You have my attention." The mercenary answered back, "What's the job and how much are you offering?"

"If you'll check your omnitool, you'll see our offer." Smirking as the mercenary's eyebrows lifted at the figure, the Illusive Man cautioned, "This is a flat offer. No negotiations. If you do not agree, then I will make the same offer to another group."

"What's the Job?" Santiago inquired.

"I want your organization to escort certain special shipments to a certain location and then return with shipments from that location. No questions asked."

"You're asking a lot." Vido responded, "What's the catch?"

"The catch..." The Illusive Man answered back, taking another drag from his cigarette, "Is that you will be facing opposition from Citadel forces as well as certain other interests."

"I'll agree to the contract, but on one condition—and it's not for more creds." Santiago declared with a smug grin, "And this is non-negotiable."

"Let's hear your terms."

"I want the help of your organization in taking over Omega." The Blue Suns leader demanded. "That will mean killing Aria T'Loak as well as dealing with my...rivals. Agree to that, and you've bought the Suns."

"Removing Aria from the chessboard might well be beneficial to both our organizations as she has made herself a nuisance recently." The Cerberus leader mused, "And I can also see the worth in removing your competition. Jona Sedaris is a loose cannon and the Blood Pack too unreliable. Very well. I agree to your proposal. Cerberus will help you in dealing with Aria and the other mercenary groups when it is time to move against them. So...when will you be ready for your first pickup?"

"Name the time and place and I'll have a squadron of my best there to meet you." Vido answered back, his lips turned up in an evil grin.

"The coordinates have been uploaded into your omnitool." The Illusive Man replied. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Santiago."

“We have Jona Sedaris and the representative for the Blood Pack on the comm.” Agent Brooks announced as she entered the Illusive Man’s chamber.

“Very good.” The Illusive Man acknowledged as he took a drag on his cigarette, “Put them on.”

“Ms. Sedaris and Warlord Garruk, Sir.” Agent Brooks replied as a holographic images of the insane leader of the Eclipse mercenary group and a snarling krogan wearing Blood Pack armor appeared.

“*Hock sent word that you’ve got a proposition for us.*” Sedaris sneered, “*So...propose.*”

“A temporary alliance...” The Illusive Man began only to be cut off by the Blood Pack leader who responded with a laugh.

“*Alliance? What can you offer me that we can’t take on our own?*” The Blood Pack representative laughed.

“Aria.” The Cerberus leader responded, flicking ash into the receptacle next to his chair. “If you complete this task for me and my partner, we, along with certain silent partners of ours, will provide your groups with assistance in taking Omega and dealing with T’loak’s allies.

“The Romulans.” Garruk spat, “They’re no threat. There’s only one ship.”

“One ship that defeated a Citadel taskforce including the *Destiny Ascension* in a military exercise.” The Illusive Man smirked as he played a recording of the practice exercise.

“*I heard rumors they possessed a stealth technology that rendered their ship invisible.*” Sedaris mused as the recording showed the *Gallena* launching what appeared to be several blobs of energy at the asari dreadnaught, “*But didn’t believe them...until now.*”

“The umpires ruled that the *Destiny Ascension* was destroyed by plasma torpedoes that broke cleanly through its kinetic barriers.” The Illusive Man declared as the recording of the war game continued to play out.

“How were you able to get this recording?” The Blood Pack leader demanded.

The Cerberus leader responded with a sly grin on his face, “From a highly placed friend in the Alliance. You’ll forgive me for not divulging my contact’s name.”

“*You can keep your secrets.*” Sedaris huffed, “*My question is...how will you and your ‘friends’ defeat that ship?*”

“Agree to help me on the projects I am about to propose to you and then carry out your side of the bargain and I’ll introduce them to you.”

“*Agreed.*” The Blood Pack leader responded, “*Provided we receive the credits you promised in advance.*”

“*That’s non-negotiable.*” Sedaris declared, agreeing with the krogan warlord.

Inclining his head in agreement, the Illusive Man activated his omnitool. “The credits have been transferred to the accounts you indicated. Now...here is what we want you to do...”

Cerberus base—undisclosed location after the merc meeting

“Can we trust them, Jack ?” Henry Lawson, one of the few who the cigarette smoking man permitted to call him by his real name asked as he entered the Illusive Man’s chamber.

“Of course not, Henry.” The Illusive Man responded with a slight grin. “However, it is in their best interests to cooperate with us for now at least. As for later once they have fulfilled their purpose...well, they and their mercenaries will serve as excellent experimental subjects for us and our allies. Speaking of which...”

“I have been informed by their...proxies...that the Reapers have agreed to direct the Collectors to attack Horizon on your signal in exchange for the colonists.” Lawson reported.

“Good.” The Illusive Man acknowledged as he put out his cigarette.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Agent Brooks?” The Illusive Man replied, turning to his attractive chocolate-skinned assistant.

“Your meeting with the Shadow Broker is in thirty minutes. Will Dr. Lawson be joining?”

“Thank you, and yes. Henry will be in attendance as well.”

“Very good, Sir. I’ll make the necessary preparations.”

New Blue Suns Headquarters—Agebinium, Amazon System, Voyager Cluster

“So Boss...How are we going to play this?”

“We’ll play it straight for now, Donner.” Vido Santiago, the leader of the Blue Suns, replied to his second in command, Donner Voske. “At

the present time, our goals, the other merc companies, and Cerberus's align. Once Aria is removed and we have control over Omega, we can move on the other groups and take them out. After that, we'll be in the driver's seat and we can tell the Illusive Man to go fuck himself. We'll be so powerful that even the Alliance and the Citadel Council will have to take notice."

"Our batarian and turian soldiers won't be too keen about working with Cerberus you know." Voske pointed out as the pair walked down a long corridor.

"For the creds they're getting paid..." Santiago growled, "They'll learn to suck it up. Tell Auric and Tyron companies to gear up and be ready to dust off in two hours. We've got a job to do."

Illium—Eclipse base

"Your orders, Commander?" Sayn, Jona Sedaris's salarian second-in-command, inquired as he walked alongside his boss.

"Assign Marl and his company the mission of taking out that cop and her people and give the contract for that girl Cerberus wants to Enyala."

"What about Wasea?"

"Increase the bounty on her." Sedaris growled, "I want that traitor taken out."

"Consider it done."

Act 2; Dreams

Chapter Summary

Dark Shepard has a disturbing dream as plots are set into motion.

SSV Normandy 2—Cerberus Frigate

Shepard—late at night

Tossing and turning in her sleep, Commander Shepard dreamed...

“Commander.”

“Kaidan.” Shepard inclined her head in an effort to hide the slight smile appearing on her face as her handsome dark-haired biotic teammate approached.

“Joker says we’ll be arriving at the Citadel in an hour, Ma’am. Any plans for shore leave?”

“Not really.” Shepard replied as she brushed back a lock of red hair. “You?”

“Same situation.” Alenko grinned sheepishly. “Probably do what I always do when I’m on the Citadel—do some window shopping on Silversun Street and after that parking my rear on a bench on the Presidium and do some people watching. Then, after that, I like to hang out at the observation deck and watch the ships come in and out...and then wind things up by playing a few rounds of quasar and enjoying a round or two at Flux. You?”

“I’m gonna keep it low-key too.” Shepard grinned, “Hit some shops...cruise the food court at Zakera Ward...kill some time at the Castle Arcade. You know...” the redheaded Spectre tentatively proposed, “Since we’re doing a lot of the same stuff...we could do it together...”

“Ummm...” Kaidan stammered unsure of how to answer as the woman standing before him quickly interrupted.

“Forget I asked.” Jane apologized with a sigh, “I was out of line. I’m sorry.”

“Ma’am?” Kaidan called out as the redhead turned away, “Please.” A shy grin appearing on his face as the attractive Spectre turned back towards him, the Canadian biotic spoke softly, “You weren’t out of line. Just kinda took me by surprise—that’s all. Ummm...if you still want to...I’d like the company. After all, it’s not as if we’re violating any fraternization regs—right?”

“Right.” Shepard nodded with a bashful smile of her own. “We’re just shipmates hanging out together on shore leave.”

“Exactly.” Kaidan responded, “Just shipmates hanging out.”

“Great.” Jane grinned, a slight blush appearing on her cheeks, “I have to check on Tali in engineering...you know.”

“Yeah.” Kaidan smiled back, “I have to go too—working with Dr. T’Soni on her combat biotics.”

Tossing and turning in her sleep, Shepard continued to dream...

“You’ve been spending a great deal of time with Lieutenant Alenko.” Dr. T’Soni remarked as she and the Commander sat across from each other in the galley over mugs of steaming hot tea.

“No more than usual.” Shepard replied with a slight stammer as she took a sip of her tea.

“Uh Huh.” Liara responded, hiding the smirk on her face behind her mug of tea. “So how was shore leave?”

“It was nice.” The lovely redhead replied, a pink flush appearing on her face. “We did some window shopping on the strip and then hung out at the arcade. Finished the evening with dinner at the Zakera Café and a couple of drinks at Flux.”

“No dancing?” Liara teased.

“No way!” Shepard chuckled, her blush reddening, “You’ve seen me on the dance floor!”

Laughing merrily, Liara joked, “Yes. What was it Joker called it?”

“The Shepard Shuffle.” Jane grinned good humoredly. “You know...there’s an old saying that women are natural dancers. Well...either I’m the exception that proves the rule...or it’s all a pile of bullshit. I guess I prefer to save my dancing for the field.”

“Is this a private conversation or can anyone join?”

“Grab a seat and take a load off, Garrus.” Shepard grinned as she gestured at the empty chair next to where Liara was sitting. “So how are those calibrations coming along?” She asked as the turian former C-Sec officer sat down with a cup of turian chocolate.

“We were just discussing how bad a dancer Shepard is...” Liara chuckled, her gentle laughter soon joined by that of her friends.

“She’s right, Shepard.” Garrus grinned, “You really are awful.”

“Yeah.” Jane laughed, “But I can still outshoot you.”

“In your dreams!”

Awakening with a cold sweat, the Shepard shivered as her eyes made out a ghostly form standing the corner leaning up against the wall.

“Who are you?” The redhead croaked hoarsely.

“*Who do you think?*” The ghost responded in a familiar, yet sad and mournful voice.

“You’re dead.”

“*Maybe...*” The ghost’s lips turned up in a small grin, “*Maybe not as dead as you think.*”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“*Not now.*” The ghost shook its head. “*It’s not time yet. But soon. Very soon.*”

Normandy 2—Galley

“What do you think of Markham and Barrett’s replacements?” Crewman Hadley asked as he poured a cup of coffee, sitting down opposite his friend, Zack Matthews.

“The freaks?” Matthews replied with a snort, “As far as I’m concerned, they can stay in their holes in the engineering section.”

“Yeah.” Hadley agreed. “Bart...one of the security troopers...told me that they keep ‘em locked in the port and starboard sections. They’re dangerous even with those batarian slave collars around their necks.”

“Talking about the freaks?” Mess Sergeant Gardner asked as he joined the other crewmen at the table.

“What else?” Hadley snorted. “They’re the topic of conversation all over the ship.”

Lowering his voice, the mess sergeant grumbled, “I don’t know about the two of you, but I don’t trust them. They ain’t right. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.” Matthews whispered, agreeing with the older man. “They scare the shit outta me.”

Nodding his head, Hadley, spotting the camera in the corner out of the corner of his eye, remarked warningly, his voice lowered, “We just do what we’re told and do our jobs. Best to leave the thinking to the Illusive Man.”

Hagalaz System—the Shadow Broker’s ship

“Broker. The drell has been returned.” One of the Shadow Broker’s agents, a human male, reported, his face ashen as he delivered the details of his report. “They...did things to him.”

“Did they forward the results of their procedures as promised?” The Broker asked.

“Yes, Shadow Broker.” The agent responded, “The information has been transmitted to you.”

Another agent, this one asari, appeared on a second monitor. “Broker. I bring news from Illium.”

“Go ahead.”

“Eclipse has agreed to our terms and will aid us in dealing with Anaya and recovering Dr. Lawson’s daughter.”

“Very good. Any other news?”

“Yes.” The asari replied, “The traitor has been identified. Transmitting information to you now.”

“Transmission received that will be all.” Opening another comm channel, the Broker spoke, “Vasir.”

“Yes, Broker.”

“I have an assignment for you.”

Act 3: Recovering What Was Lost

Chapter Summary

Kasumi and Jacob attempt to recover an important part of Kasumi's past.

Romulan/Federation combined legation—Citadel

"Thanks for coming Jacob." Kasumi said as she greeted the muscular dark-skinned man standing in the legation foyer.

"So...what's the problem?" Jacob inquired as the mischievous thief guided him out of the office.

"Not here, Jacob." Kasumi whispered, "Our friends are okay, but not everyone here can be trusted." she glanced quickly in the direction of the volus, "I know a place we can talk freely."

"Lead on."

Leading her companion to a small apartment, tastefully furnished and decorated, Kasumi gestured for her companion to sit on a leather couch. Joining him on the couch, the professional thief took a deep breath before speaking in a low voice, "I need your help, Jacob."

"What for?" Jacob asked.

"It's a long story..." Kasumi warned as she again heaved a sigh.

"I've got time." Jacob replied with a supportive smile, "Go on."

"My...partner...more than a partner really...Keiji...Keiji Okuda...besides being a great hacker and thief, worked for Alliance intelligence." Kasumi explained. "Long story short, he got into trouble with the Alliance." With a wry grin on her face, the expert thief elaborated, "We were hired by different bosses to steal a painting."

"So the two of you met on the job." Jacob interjected with a snort.

"Yeah." Kasumi's lips turned up in a sad smile. "Instead of turning the painting over to our bosses, we decided to keep it for ourselves."

"I bet that made you popular with your employers." Jacob laughed, "But where does the greybox come in? I know Alliance intelligence implants grayboxes into their top agents, so I assume Keiji was one of those..."

"He was." Kasumi affirmed.

"So...what happened?"

"Well...he got caught stealing classified information and selling it, so the Alliance put him on trial for treason."

"That's a hanging offense." Jacob commented with a low whistle.

"Yeah." Kasumi agreed, "One of the few crimes still on the books that carry the death penalty. For a while it was looking bad for Keiji, but his defense attorney got him off on a technicality."

"How?"

"The attorney objected to the Alliance introducing the memories in his graybox as evidence because it violated the Alliance statute against self-incrimination. After the judge dismissed the charges, Keiji and I disappeared for a while and kept low. Then..." she mournfully related, "We made a big mistake. We got greedy. We went after Donovan Hock's treasure vault."

"I've heard stories about that vault." Jacob remarked, "It's supposed to be impregnable."

"There's no such thing as a vault you can't get into—provided you know what you're doing." Kasumi quipped with a sad smile, "And Keiji was the best. We got into the villa by skydiving from low orbit."

Letting out another whistle, Jacob commented with a note of admiration in his voice, "Gutsy move. A lot could go wrong with that sorta thing."

"Yeah." Kasumi agreed, "Especially since neither one of us was biotic. Once we landed and got into the villa, we found six guards on patrol—all former Alliance commandoes—best in the business. When we saw that, we knew we were in the right place."

"So how did you get by the guards?"

Chuckling, Kasumi recalled, "I distracted them while Keiji cracked the vault." Her laughter fading away into a sad sigh, the master thief groaned, "We kept tabs on each other through our comms. That's when I heard Keiji's scream. I panicked." She admitted tearfully, "Broke cover and ran like hell to where he was supposed to be—guards chasing me all the way. I got away from them after bruising them a bit...that's when I saw him."

“Keiji?”

“Yeah.” Kasumi replied with a single nod of her head, tears flowing down her cheeks. “Hock stabbed something into Keiji’s head and used it to remove his graybox. He was still alive when I got to him and the guards were pounding at the door. Keiji told me to leave him. I didn’t want to. He said he was dying anyway and didn’t want me to die too. He begged me to come back one day and steal the graybox back so that we could be together again.”

“His memories of the times you had together.” Jacob concluded.

Bowing her head, Kasumi affirmed, “Yeah. I’ve been waiting for the right time to get it back.” Raising her head, the young thief’s eyes glinted with a determination Jacob hadn’t seen before, “I’m ready now—but I need your help.”

“Tell me your plan and I’ll let you know whether I’m in or not.” Jacob replied.

“Fair enough.” Kasumi averred. “Hock is having a party at his estate on Beckenstein. Very exclusive...arms dealers...mercenary leaders...politicians...you know...” the master thief sarcastically quipped, “the scum of the galaxy. The plan is simple. Infiltrate the party. Disable the vault’s defenses... Break into the vault. Steal the graybox. Walk out. If all goes well, Hock won’t even know we were there until we’re long gone.”

“When is this party supposed to happen?” Jacob asked.

“The end of the week.” Kasumi smirked, “That will give me time to get our cover story in place. You’re Solomon Gunn, the leader of a small, but reputable mercenary company. I’ve taken the liberty of slipping in a profile of you in *Badass Weekly* and a few other mercenary publications and outlets. Don’t worry about getting in. I’ve also purchased outfits for both of us.” Chuckling, the master thief quipped, “Thanks to the Romulan and Federation legations, I’ve scored us some Romulan stealth armor and Federation type one hand phasers. We’ll have no problems getting them through Hock’s searches and scans.”

“Sounds good.” Jacob replied, “So when do we go?”

Her lips turning up in a sly grin, Kasumi enigmatically replied, “Friday. Meet me at the legation and we’ll go from there.”

Beckenstein—Donovan Hock’s Estate

“Okay...let’s recap.” Jacob suggested as the shuttle piloted itself to the Hock estate.

“Your cover name is Solomon Gunn...” Kasumi recapitulated, “And I’m your aide. You run a small elite company of mercenaries in the Terminus Systems that is very particular in the jobs it takes but has an excellent reputation for attaining results with little to no blowback. Exactly the sort of person Hock expects.”

“So far so good...” Jason mused, “But what if Hock asks specific questions about jobs or people?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there to feed you the answers thanks to this little toy the Romulans gave me.” She held out a hypo and injected first herself and then him.” It’s a subcutaneous communicator. Limited range, but good enough for our purposes, and undetectable by our technology. I’m also wearing a personal cloak, so, if for some reason I’m not permitted into an area with you, I can still remain close.”

“Sounds like you got it covered.” Jacob replied.

“Just keep your conversation to generalities and don’t talk business and you’ll be okay.” Kasumi advised, speaking in a reassuring voice. “You’ve got this, Jacob.”

“So...what’s the plan?”

“I’ve scored an invite to his party where you’ll be one of several mercenary leaders in attendance.” Kasumi said, filling her partner in on the details. “Like all the other guests, you’ll be bringing him a gift. In your case, a statue of Saren—very rare and very well crafted. Hock will love it. If we were using our weapons and armor—that’s how I would have smuggled them in because, knowing Hock, he’ll have it taken directly to where we want to go. But...since we’re using our friends’ gear, it’s just a key to get us through the door. Keep the Predator I gave you though. You’ll be expected to carry a concealed sidearm. Not carrying it would draw attention. As long as you keep it holstered, you’ll be good to go.”

“All right.” Jacob nodded as the aircar drew closer to their destination, “What next after we get in?”

“The party will be in the ballroom and the gardens out back.” Kasumi said, “We casually make our way to the back of the ballroom. That’s where the vault door is. Once we find it, we case the security and one-by-one peel off the layers. Then...we’re in.” She concluded in a bittersweet tone, “Then I take Keiji’s graybox back and finally get a chance to say goodbye. That graybox and the memories it contains are all I have left of Keiji, and I’m not going to let Hock just paw through them.”

“Okay.” Jacob responded, “Let’s get your graybox back.”

Hock Estate

“Mr. Gunn.” Donovan Hock called out in greeting, speaking with a thick Irish brogue, Hock was a man of average height and weight with ruddy red hair and distinctive sideburns and wearing an expensive, yet tasteful, suit.

“Mr. Hock.” Jacob smoothly responded, offering his hand only to have his gesture rebuffed aloofly by his host. Not showing any sign of offense, the dark-skinned biotic offered his compliments, “Thank you for the imitation.” Gesturing at the statue of Saren being transported on a grav-sled, Jacob remarked, “Please accept this as a gift.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gunn.” The arms-dealer replied formally as one of his bodyguards carried out a scan of the statue, receiving an all-clear from the guard. “I’m sure you understand the need for security.”

“Of course.” Jacob answered graciously as Kasumi moved up to join him only to be halted by Hock’s raised hand.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gunn.” The arms dealer forcibly stated with a veneer of politeness, “But I am going to have to ask that your aide remain outside. Guests only.”

Catching Kasumi’s almost imperceptible nod of her head out of the corner of his eye, Jacob nodded in agreement. “Of course, Mr. Hock. Your house—your rules.”

“I’m glad you understand.” Hock magnanimously replied, gesturing towards the door, “Enjoy yourself.”

Following his guest into the luxurious villa, Hock very quickly ducked into a side alcove. Tapping his comm, he commanded in a low whisper, “Identity scan of our latest guest and his aide?”

“There is no Solomon Gunn. The imposter’s real name is Jacob Taylor and his aide...”

“Kasumi Goto.” Hock finished, “Any further information on Taylor?”

“Cerberus has placed a substantial bounty on him and an associate of his, Miranda Lawson. Ms. Lawson’s last known location was on the Romulan warship and is currently untouchable. Taylor has also served on the alien ship as a crewmember, but recently debarked for undefined personal reasons. Ms. Goto...”

“I’m well aware of Ms. Goto and her reputation, Chief Roe.” The arms dealer interrupted.

“Sorry, Sir. Do you want us to detain them?”

“No.” Hock shook his head, “I know what they are after. Keep them under surveillance. Let them continue with their little scheme uninterrupted. Also, have our friends studying the graybox remove it to my holding on Arvuna immediately and replace it with the copy. We’ll let Ms. Goto think that she succeeded. She and her companion will be in for a rude—and very unpleasant—surprise when she tries to access the contents of that fake.”

“Understood, Sir. Roe out.”

“You still with me, Kasumi? Jacob murmured as he walked, his eyes wide with astonishment and admiration at the paintings hanging on the walls and statues lining the carpeted walkway.

“Right beside you.” Kasumi, invisible thanks to her cloak, responded with a chuckle, “Hock might be a bastard, but he’s a bastard with good taste. I could get a good price out of most of these paintings and statues—and they’re the cheap trash that he shows off for the public. He keeps the really valuable stuff in his vault. That’s where we’re going.”

“So...how do we get through his security?”

“The vault has three layers. The first layer is easy—that’s just a kinetic barrier. All we have to do is find the off switch and pull it.”

“That’s it?” Jacob laughed in disbelief.

“That’s it.” Kasumi chuckled, “The barrier’s mostly there for show and to scare off amateurs. It’s the other two layers that will be difficult for anyone but me.”

“You sure don’t lack in confidence.” Jacob quipped with a snort.

“Confident is good.” Kasumi replied, “Famous is not. That’s where Keiji made his mistake—he became too well known.”

“So how do we get past the other two layers?” Jacob asked, returning to the business at hand.

“The second key is a DNA scanner.” Kasumi replied, “To get that, we’re going to need samples of Hock’s DNA—that’s why he refuses to shake hands when he’s not wearing gloves. You’ll also note that he neither eats nor drinks in public.”

“Interesting.” Jacob commented, “So how do we get that DNA sample?”

The master thief responded with a chuckle, “Simple. We break into his private quarters.”

“How do you plan to accomplish that?” Jacob remarked sarcastically.

“Details.” Kasumi airily replied, “Don’t worry, I’ll find us a way in. It’s the third key that might prove tricky.”

“What do we have to do?”

“We need to first find Hock’s password and then get a sample of his voice. We get those, then I can program in the password.”

“So how are we going to go about doing all that?” Jacob asked.

“One thing at a time, Jacob.” Kasumi responded, this time with a serious tone. “First thing we need to do is for you to mingle. Avoid getting involved in business conversations with the guests. Keep it simple and basic. While you’re doing that, keep an eye out for anything...no matter how unimportant it might seem. Think of this as solving a puzzle. We peel off the onion one layer at a time.”

“Okay.” Jacob nodded in agreement, “Let’s get started. I guess I should start mingling.”

“Good idea. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open too. Don’t worry, Jacob.” The master thief declared reassuringly, “I know what I’m doing. Go ahead and take a walk outside...let’s see what turns up.”

“All right.” Jacob muttered as he strolled around the ballroom, taking his time to appear as if he was carefully examining the different paintings and statues on display.

“That’s a Manet...” Kasumi quipped, “But compared to what Hock keeps in his vault, it’s a piece of junk.”

“Damn.” Jacob whispered, “What does he keep in that vault? Other than the graybox?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Strolling out of the ballroom and into the garden in the back, Jacob spotted a datapad. Picking it up, he examined it along with his companion. “A Chief Roe seems to be calling the shots.”

“This Chief sounds like a hardass.” Kasumi noted, “But we might be able to use this if we can get into the guards’ communications. We should be close to the vault entrance. Let’s check it out.” The thief prompted.

“Won’t Hock’s security spot us?” Jacob asked his invisible companion.

“Not if we don’t try to access any of the keys.” Kasumi replied, further explaining, “If we find the control for the kinetic barrier, I can backtrack the connection to the switch that powers it. Then, all we have to do is flip it to off.”

“That simple.”

“That simple.” Kasumi chuckled. “The more complicated they make these things, the easier it is to get through them. Now...come on.”

Making their way down to the vault entrance, the master thief smiled. “See...easy.” Carefully examining the security consoles, she nodded her head in satisfaction. “Just as I thought. He’s using a land line to carry power to the barrier. Give me a moment.” She requested as she punched in a code on her omnitool. “Got it. See...” She pointed to a power conduit that ran between the walls. “All we have to do now is follow the conduit to the switch.”

Using their omnitools to trace the conduit, the pair came to a stop near a bookshelf containing a statue. Chuckling, Kasumi pulled at the statue. “That’s it.” She declared triumphantly. “Barrier’s down. Now for step two.”

“Which is?”

“There’s Hock.” Kasumi pointed to the arms dealer who was currently holding court near a fountain. “Get him talking—he’s got a big ego, so get him talking about himself. The hard part will be getting away from him once he gets started.”

“How long do I need him to talk?”

“Just long enough so that I can get his voice print. Remember to keep it to generalities and stay away from talking business.”

“Okay.” Jacob took a deep breath, “Wish me luck.”

“Don’t worry. Just stroke his ego a little and then let him do all the talking. I’ll let you know when to disengage. Now—go.”

“Mr. Gunn.” Hock inclined his head as he addressed his guest, “Please accept my apologies for my abruptness earlier.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Hock.” Jacob politely responded, “It’s quite understandable that a man of your position would need to take precautions. You must have many enemies.”

“Quite true, Mr. Gunn.” The arms dealer answered back before launching into an extended self-congratulatory monologue, ending with applause from the sycophants gathered around him, hanging on to every word he uttered. Concluding his speech, Hock smiled condescendingly down at his guest, “I’m glad you understand, Mr. Gunn. Enjoy the rest of the party.”

Taking advantage of Hock’s dismissal to gracefully disengage, Jacob smirked as his cloaked companion murmured, “I told you to get him talking and he did. I got what we need.”

“What now?” Jacob asked.

“To your right... that first room. Meet you there.”

Making his way to the room, Jacob at once spotted a door opposite him.

“Security’s behind that door.” Kasumi cautioned as she drew her phaser, setting it to stun. “We’re going to have to move quickly. Ready?”

Taking out his own phaser from one of his pockets, Jacob also doublechecked the setting, making sure that it was on stun. “Ready when you are.”

“All right.” The master thief replied as she easily cracked the electronic lock. “Now!”

Moving quickly, the pair stunned the two guards behind the desk before either could draw their weapons. “What are we looking for?” Jacob asked as he moved behind the desk and disarmed the slumbering guards.

“Give me a moment.” Kasumi replied as she accessed the computer console. The trace of a smile appearing on her face, she cried out triumphantly, “Found it! The password is Perugia.” The master thief declared as she entered it in on her omnitool. “I also found a recording of Chief Roe’s voice. We can use that to get through the guard at the door to Hock’s private quarters. That’ll save us having to get into a fight.”

“I’m all for that.” Jacob responded, “Hock’s quarters?”

“Yup.” Kasumi grinned, “Let’s get that DNA sample.”

Approaching the door to Hock’s private quarters, Jacob, accompanied by his cloaked companion, was at once challenged by the guard at the door. “I’m sorry, but there is no admittance to Mr. Hock’s private quarters without authorization.”

“I have authorization.” Jacob replied.

“From whom?” The guard demanded.

“Chief Roe.” Jacob answered promptly.

“I’ll need to see it.” The guard insisted.

Activating his omnitool, Jacob played the phony recording. “*They have authorization, Samuels. Let them in.*”

Unlocking the door, the guard stepped aside, “You’re clear.”

Entering the arms dealer’s plush private quarters, Jacob let out a low whistle, “Damn.”

“Yeah.” Kasumi replied, deactivating her cloak, “Bastard knows how to live.”

“So what are we looking for?”

“Anything that can give me a good DNA sample.” Kasumi replied as she began searching. “Found some DNA and a credit chit on the couch—but not enough for a good sample. Keep looking.”

“What about the ashtray and wineglass?” Jacob inquired, pointing to the objects in question.

“There’s some from the wineglass, but nothing from the ashtray.” Kasumi replied, “Nice.” The master thief exclaimed as she pointed to an antique weapons collection. “Plenty of DNA, but contaminated. We can’t use it.” Glancing down at some loose papers lying near a datapad, she remarked, “Looks like he was trying to break into Keiji’s graybox, but no success.” Glancing at the computer console, the thief’s lips turned up in a smirk, “Got it. Let’s go.”

“Okay, we’ve got everything.” Jacob commented, “So, what now?”

“We crack the vault.” Kasumi smirked. “Ready?”

“Let’s do it.”

Donovan Hock

“*Roe, Sir. Okuda’s graybox and the specialists studying it have left planet. Taylor and Goto are on their way to the vault. Orders?*”

“Allow them proceed undisturbed to their shuttle.” Hock ordered, “Let Goto think that she has succeeded in her little plan. Once they lift off, contact our friends in orbit. We’ll let them take care of Mr. Taylor and Ms. Goto.”

“*Understood, Sir.*”

Kasumi and Jacob

“We’ve completed the first step. The kinetic barrier is down.” Kasumi smugly declared as she activated a console. “DNA...child’s play. Now for the final key.” Hock’s voice then came through the omnitool. “Perugia.” Smirking triumphantly as the vault door slid open, the master thief announced cockily, “We’re in.”

“Let’s get what we came for and get out.” Jacob grumbled as the pair on entering the vault, turned and went down a flight of stairs to an antechamber with the statue of Saren that they had earlier given to Hock standing in the corner.

“Ugly fucker.” Kasumi quipped, pointing to a door. “We should find what we’re looking for behind that. Then, once we get it, we walk out the way we came—no one the wiser.”

“Yeah, right.” Jacob muttered, “As if these things always go off without a hitch.”

“Only had one real fubar.” Kasumi replied before admitting in a soft voice, “Here...and Keiji got killed. Now...I’m going to get back what was taken. Come on.”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, Jacob replied, “Lead the way.” As they entered a spacious chamber, the former Cerberus commando whistled, “Damn. You weren’t kidding.”

“Yeah.” Kasumi smiled, “I could get lost in here.”

“Is that?” Jacob exclaimed as he pointed at a statue that he’d only seen holoimages of.

“Michelangelo’s *David*.” Kasumi confirmed, “Don’t ask me how Hock got that or Lady Liberty’s head over there. If the Alliance knew they were here they’d send Fifth Fleet to bring them back.”

“Damn!” Jacob exclaimed as he saw a statue of a giant snarling horned...creature. “What the hell is that?”

“I don’t know.” Kasumi jibed, “But I hope I don’t run across it in some dark alley somewhere.”

“You and me both.” Jacob replied with a laugh as he and his partner made their way to a small table with an enclosed artifact inside.

“That’s it!” Kasumi cried out, “Keiji’s graybox!” Abandoning subtlety, she broke the glass and extracted the implant. “Keiji...”

“You can look at it later.” Jacob urged, jerking his head urgently towards the exit. “Let’s get outta here—now!”

“Good idea.” Kasumi agreed, leading the way out of the vault. Taking a deep breath, she smiled triumphantly, “We did it. Now you just saunter on out. Don’t talk to anyone and don’t appear like you’re in a rush. Just take your time and walk away. I’ll be right beside you.”

Taking their time, the pair successfully reached their shuttle. Smiling, Kasumi decloaked, “Time to go.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Jacob grinned as the pair entered the shuttle. After getting clearance to lift off, the ex-Cerberus commando piloted the shuttlecraft off the ground and into space. Turning to his partner, he prompted, “We’re far enough away. I guess it’s safe for you to access the graybox now.”

“All right.” She said through clenched teeth, placing the implant in position. “Here goes!”

Neither she nor her companion had time to scream as their bodies were engulfed by searing pain causing them to collapse at once in a heap on the deck and leaving them easy prey for the Tal’Shiar warbird that had engulfed their shuttle in its tractor beam. Moments later, two Romulans wearing Tal’Shiar uniforms materialized in the Kodiak.

“Are these the two promised to us?” An uhlan asked the lieutenant standing beside him.

“Yes.” The lieutenant responded, tapping his communicator. “Tamril to *V’Shanna*. Hock kept his word. Am beaming the prisoners to sickbay. Have the stasis tubes ready for them.”

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The seeds are planted for future events that will bring things to a head.

Normandy 2—Comm room

"Shepard. How are Subject Zero and Grunt adjusting to their environment?"

"They have not caused any problems as yet, Sir. They seem content to remain in their quarters and, as per your orders, they have not been disturbed."

"Good." The Illusive Man responded, "Very good. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, Sir." Shepard replied deferentially, maintaining a polite tone. "I am concerned about their fitness. They're loose cannons. I'm not sure I can trust them in a fight."

"You can." The Illusive Man responded as he took a drag from his cigarette. "But that's not why I contacted you. I have new orders for you."

"Sir?"

"You are to proceed to Illium. There, you and your team will coordinate with an Eclipse mercenary group—Mr. Leng has the details, he'll brief you at the appropriate time. Any questions?"

"What sort of mission is this?" Shepard inquired, "And why was Mr. Leng informed as to the particulars and not me?"

"You have your orders, Shepard. Leng will have point on the Illium operation. You will follow his lead."

"So I'm being relieved of command?" The redhead frowned at the holographic image of her superior.

"Not relieved of command." The Illusive Man replied somewhat mollifyingly, "Leng's unique talents and abilities are best suited for the negotiations that must be made with our allies while your primary responsibility will continue to be operational command in the field—including properly utilizing our new assets."

Feeling a sharp jab in the back of her skull, Shepard acknowledged submissively, "Understood, Sir."

"Good. I expect success."

"Yes, Sir." Are we finished here?"

"You can go." The Illusive Man responded. As Shepard turned to leave, the Cerberus leader addressed his assassin, "Mr. Leng? Stay. We have important details to discuss."

RRW Gallena on the way to Illium

Cilla and Liara--Holodeck

"You seem preoccupied, Liara." Cilla Oudekirk observed as she noticed the pensive look on her asari friend's face as they walked down a country trail. "What's wrong?"

"I received a...I guess you could call it cryptic...communication from one of my informants on Illium."

"Can you tell me what it's about?" Cilla inquired as the couple stopped in front of a fountain.

Nodding her head, Liara replied with a worried frown. "It's a long story...can we talk about it somewhere else?"

"My quarters?" Cilla suggested receiving in return a warm smile and nod of the head from her companion. "All right. Let's go. Computer... end program."

V'lana and Anaya

"Hi Anaya." V'lana smiled at the image of the asari police officer on her monitor. "What can I do for you?"

"I hear you're on your way to Illium."

"Yep." V'lana acknowledged. "We should be there soon."

"I heard about your..." The asari began, only to pause, not sure of how to proceed.

"Yeah." V'lana inclined her head slightly, "Kaidan's alive...but only just. We can't take him out of stasis without killing him until we find a strong telepath from my universe and possibly an asari matriarch. And...while there are any number of matriarchs here..."

"Telepaths are another matter." Anaya finished before proposing. "Meet you at Eternity Bar? We can talk more there. Besides..." she remarked with a warm smile, "I owe you a drink."

"Thanks." V'lana answered back with a slight grin, "I think I'd like that."

"See you when you get here."

Miranda

"Are you sure, Lanteia?" Miranda pressed the asari on her comm monitor, "Absolutely sure."

"Yes." The Australian biotic's informant replied, "Niket is ready to move—but we have to move quickly. Her father has hired Eclipse mercenaries to track her down and I've just gotten word that Cerberus is aware of her presence on the planet as well. It's a sure bet they're going to try to grab her to use as leverage against you."

"Thanks, Lanteia. We're on our way to Illium now. I'll contact you when we arrive."

"I'll be at the Eternity Bar. You can meet me there."

"I'll see you soon." Miranda acknowledged, terminating the transmission. Tapping her comm badge, she called out. "Subcommander? This is Miranda. I need to speak with you about an urgent matter. Thank you. I'm on my way."

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