

## Irukanji

The cliff face crumbled beneath her glove. Welded tuff, a loose conglomeration of volcanic rock. ‘Not welded enough.’ She looked for another way up. ‘Just another five meters.’ The aerial from the probe was visible, jutting out slightly over the edge. Sarinou had to get there. That probe was passing through the Oculus Nebula during the Separatist raid and may hold evidence. It had jumped after exiting the nebula, however its nav system must have been damaged since it came back in the wrong location – not just off-course but too close to the gravity well of this planet. She had tracked it here in secret.

Planet Omi is deep within the Separatist sector. ‘Sector’ is perhaps generous – they control a handful of planetary systems that constitute five to ten percent of the volume of a sector, yet they claim its entirety as their own. An aspirational name.

All this left Sarinou in a quandary. Given her covert status on this world she could not simply fly a craft up to the promontory and collect the probe. Anything airborne on Omi was strictly controlled. That the Separatists did not detect the probe as anything other than a small meteor says something about Alliance fleet’s stealth capabilities, an asset shared by her jumpsuit, which allowed her to reach this site undetected.

Sarinou Odette was a member of the Alliance, a group of nations and later planets that agreed to work together for mutual aid during our spaceward expansion. The Separatists were the latest fly in the ointment. While better organized than their predecessors the reasons were always the same – less oversight and taxation.

She had come to Omi under the pretense of a service worker for city sanitation. During inbound customs there was nothing out of the ordinary in her belongings – a memory card full of movies and a few personal effects. Her travel bag was made of a nice material, but was otherwise unremarkable until activated. Given the proper code the material could reconfigure itself to be an EVA stealth suit, the very one she was now wearing. She had used it to slip out of the lakeside vacation villa she had booked an hour outside of Omi Centrale, the main city.

The hike to the probe took a day and half through dense forest. After all that she saw thwarted by the low, crumbly promontory on which the probe landed.

"Going to have to risk a bit of visibility," she said aloud to herself. "Damn."

She took a few materials she had acquired from city maintenance stores and assembled them into a small explosive charge. She found a nearby tree of suitable height, calculated some angles, then placed the charge at its base. She hid around the corner of the cliff and detonated it. She winced at the concussion, worried seismic sensors would detect it.

‘Assuming the worst, they could be here in half an hour. I doubt they’d summon a military response for a small thump deep in the forest. Probably send a survey crew out in a week,’ she thought.

She hurried nonetheless, scrambling up the trunk that now lay against the top of the cliff. Coming up over the edge she saw the probe lay mostly in-tact. As she slotted the mem card for the download she noticed a name. ‘Irukanji’ had been hand-lettered onto the probe, a practice some units prefer. ‘High marks for irony, if not spelling.’ She smiled to herself.

The Irukandji are jellyfish from the southern tropical ocean of Earth. They are tiny – no bigger than the fingernail of your smallest finger, yet can deliver devastating pain that lasts for days, and has no cure. This tiny probe of less than one cubic meter could deliver a similarly outsized sting.

The probe responded to the mem card with a low battery light. She swore. She had brought a battery for this purpose, but was hoping to avoid using it. She had ‘borrowed’ it from the maintenance warehouse and was hoping to return it without needing a recharge. Every extra step was another chance for failure.

The probe powered up quickly with the help of the battery. She entered the access code and began the download. A whirring sound caught her attention.

“Shit! Survey drone.” She hugged her knees to her chest and froze. Her radar profile was no more than an average sized boulder, not much different than the probe she squatted next to. Seconds later the drone came into view overhead. It flew straight across without slowing, which she hoped was a good sign.

The probe blinked. Download complete. She removed the mem card, then entered a code instructing the stealth coating to lose cohesion, preventing the Separatists from reverse-engineering it. Then she reached to set the probe to self-erase. Something stayed her hand. The thought ‘encrypt it harder’ appeared in her mind. Trusting her instincts she had the probe create a random one-time key and saved it to the mem card. The probe then began encrypting all memory. She removed the card and started to leave. The battery. Encryption with a key this large is slow. Did she have the hour necessary? If she left the battery there it would likely be investigated. ‘It’s going to get investigated anyway,’ she

thought. The evidence of site compromise would be obvious to anyone given the explosive residue, so the battery would not change that part of the equation. She left the battery to finish the encryption without her.

She climbed down and hurried under tree cover. Moments later another drone flew atop the site and hovered there. No doubt landers would arrive soon, bringing troops and a survey team. She moved away slowly until fully out of range of the drone. Then she ran.

The return trip took six hours, aided by having learned the route and a load of stims. She removed the stealth suit and slowed her breathing as she approached the lakeside resort. Before clearing the forest she reconfigured her suit back into a handbag, then changed back into the clothes she had hidden. She checked her appearance while pulling out a brush.

Sarinou stood about five feet eight inches tall, with dark brown shoulder-length hair. In her own words, her complexion was somewhere between latte and mocha, she would joke with her friends. Her mother was descended from people native to the tropics on Earth, while her father had been lighter-skinned. Aside from her fitness training as an operative, she looked like any other civilian around and could blend in easily.

Satisfied she did not have streaks of dirt across her forehead, she walked across the lawn to the lodge. 'Can they track footprints in that dense jungle?' she wondered. 'I doubt it. But time to check out anyway.' At the front desk she booked a flight on the shuttle back to Centrale.

"Going to be delayed. One, two hours."

"What for?"

"Credentials check. Something has everyone all stirred up."

"Ok," she replied as nonchalantly as she could muster – a difficult task with the stims still in her system. She considered trying to book surface transport but decided that would look suspicious. Instead she chose to wait at the bar with the bulk of the other passengers.

Thirty minutes later a bored-looking guard joined the gate clerk and called for them to queue. He checked everyone's cred card with a perfunctory manner, clearly not concerned with any invasion threat from the lakeside resort. When her time came he took her card, watched the system blink green then returned it without looking up.

The whole trip back she considered what to do about the battery. 'Could they track it to my maintenance facility? The batteries are completely interchangeable and used everywhere. Do they have serial numbers? Could I replace it with a different one?' She considered the

immediate cred check. 'I will have to replace it without the system noticing. Any battery movements now will be noticed.'

When she got back to her quarters she changed into her work coveralls and went straight back out. She walked to the other side of town, outside of her maintenance zone. She spotted a small sanitation cart next to a large planter. Those carts run on the same batteries. She spotted the worker associated with it. He was busy fixing some plumbing for a nearby fountain. She flipped up her hood, walked calmly to the cart, flipped up the seat and removed a battery. After pocketing the battery and putting the seat down she pretended to make a note in her handheld, then walked away.

Commander Stafford was angrier than usual. He surveyed the probe site through narrowed eyes. The fact that it made it here undetected showed just how far ahead the Allied stealth technology was. Add to that the existence of a covert operative and you are left with a very bad day. Now he had not one but two very awkward breaches to explain to the admiral.

"Tell me some good news," he growled to one of the scientists returning from the forest.

"Size seven."

"What?"

"They wore size seven boots. Standard issue."

"That's it? All you expensive equipment and that's all you've got?"

"They knew what they were doing, sir."

"Fucking hell. There's no telling how many of them have infiltrated."

"Likely just the one," Lieutenant Velda chimed in. Stafford turned to look at her.

"If they had a team or a ship they would have taken the probe rather than let us find it. Further, the use of a charge on that tree is an act of desperation."

"Which means they came in by conventional transport," Stafford concluded. "Lock down outbound transit."

"Yes, sir."

The next day at work Sarinou replaced the battery. She left it in the charging rack, but slightly out of place so that the contacts did not touch. She did not want to risk the system recording the event.

“You hear about the lockdown?” Marty Burns asked.

“Yeah. Not like I’m going anywhere anyway,” she replied coolly.

“Me neither. Wonder what it is this time.”

“This time? It happen often?”

“No. Once or twice a year. Last time was during the Janus Offensive.”

“Oh, got it. Missed that one.”

“Lucky you. Was a total pain. Just walking around town took hours. Checkpoints everywhere. Where were you?”

“Doing contracts on neutral worlds. Nothing exciting. Irrigation canals. But no checkpoints.”

“Why’d you come here?”

“Double pay.”

“Yeah. Same.”

“This thing is encrypted tighter than Stafford’s...” Indira was saying as Stafford walked in.

“Very tightly,” she finished.

“Can you crack it?”

“It seems to have been done with a one-time key. A very large one. So No.”

Veins pulsed on Staffords temples. Velda drew the conclusion first.

“That means whoever did this is still here. With the key.”

“Are you sure?”

“You would never encrypt probes like that for large-scale fleet duties. You need to be able to get the data remotely, which requires a different kind of key.”

Stafford looked at Indira for validation.

“She’s right, sir.”

“Anything special about the mem card holding it?”

“No. The slot is completely standard. Same as everywhere.”

“How are we going to find a two centimeter card in a city of two million?” Stafford thought aloud.

“Bait,” Velda posed.

“Go on.”

“Provide what looks like a compromised comm system. They will be motivated to get this data off-world before they risk physically leaving.”

“None of this leaves this room. Make it happen.”

The next week passed without incident for Sarinou. Her credentials were solid, raising no alarms at any checkpoint. Still she was uneasy. She knew the clock was ticking. She had to get the data off-world. ‘My contract is up in two months. I could decide to not renew. The only trick would be the card. There is no way to get that through customs. I need options.’ She let that thought percolate and went back to work.

Two days later her handheld received unencrypted signals from off-planet.

“Someone’s going to get busted for that screw-up,” she quipped to Burns.

“Can’t be good. Everyone’s guessing what it might be. Some new jamming from Allied is my bet.”

‘If only,’ she mused internally.

That night she set her handheld to passively monitor outbound signals. She was surprised to see several unencrypted transmissions going out. Something felt wrong about that. The Separatists would never be that sloppy. Further, all signals originate from a single dish. ‘Did they get hacked? Are there other operatives on-world besides me?’ Moments later it dawned on her. ‘Honeypot. It’s a trap. Time for a Plan B.’

“Ok time’s up. A week has gone by and nobody showed up to the party,” Stafford glared at Velda and Indira.

“Maybe they’re not in a hurry,” Indira offered hopefully. Velda shot her a sideways glance.

“Not likely.” I still think we were too obvious. She is probably sitting tight, working on a plan.”

“She?” Stafford eyed Velda.

“A hunch.”

A technician walked in and gave a small tablet to Velda, then pointed at the screen.

“48 batteries unaccounted for across the city,” Velda announced. “Sending teams after every one.”

Sergeants Shakira and Grace were not thrilled with this assignment. Elite soldiers sent after batteries.

“They don’t even move. I wouldn’t mind tracking a ship or something. A battery?”

They were one of six teams, each handling eight cases. By the time they reached the maintenance facility that houses the cart with the missing battery, it was nearly night, and their motivation was waning with the light.

“Says it was reported missing six days ago, that right?” Grace asked the foreman.

“Yeah. It got plugged in the night before and ran a normal cycle. But by morning it only showed 7/8 charge. I lifted up the seat and saw one missing.”

“The cart would have had a full complement of eight when it left in the morning, correct?”

“That’s right. Otherwise the system would have flagged it.”

“Show us where the cart went that day.”

Sarinou took lunch in a small kiosk frequented by dock workers, hoping to get a lead on shipping things off-world undetected. Instead of learning anything about outbound, all she heard was inbound. Tox ingredients mostly. ‘Nothing I can use here,’ she thought as she disposed her paper noodle bowl and walked off. ‘Maybe I can squirt something through that compromised dish under their noses.’

The next day she returned to the food court. She checked the time. There should have been a reaction by now. She measured the signal as it went out thirty minutes ago. She had bounced it off a dozen internal relays, each time having it randomly choose the next destination, with the last one being set as the dish. She had sent it from a disposable ‘burner’ device that she left near the booth where she heard the tox smugglers’

conversation. After transmitting the burner device had been picked up by some passerby, further occluding the trail. However she could detect no reaction from the authorities. She paused to consider the irony of 'Separatist Authorities' and laughed.

She continued to monitor traffic on the unsecured dish. 'Maybe I should just send it,' she thought. Based on this test the signal should get out, but then what? Will it get to the jump-relays that will send it through to neutral worlds? Or would our own Allied listening devices in this sector pick it up?

The next day she saw several new maintenance workers in the food court, each a bit too muscular and edgy. 'Ah. There you are. Signal was definitely heard by Separatists. Punt on Plan B. She wondered who picked up the handheld as she walked away thinking about Plan C.

"It was a test pattern," Indira reported. "They were testing our response."

Stafford fumed. "Testing us!" he spat. He turned to Velda. "Make sure you have something next time." He stalked out.

Indira looked worried. "We can't just make clues happen."

"But we can manufacture suspects."

A chill went down Indira's spine.

Sarinou decided to look at the data from the Irukanji, to verify if it is worth continuing to take increasing risks. Her handheld lacked the processing power to decode all the signals, but could read the images. She hoped to get lucky by sampling the thousands of files it contained in the visible spectrum. She inserted the card into her small projector and started flicking through the image folders. After two hours of staring at empty space inside the Oculus Nebula she got a hit. A ship was approaching the nebula. Not Allied. A dozen frames later she could read the name - Banner of Glory. 'Separatist hubris.' She shook her head. Dozens of small objects left the forward hold and moved into a grid pattern in the nebula. Mines. They came early to set a trap. Good thing they could not see the Irukanji.'

Sarinou turned off the projector and removed the card. She had already seen enough to catch them in a formal lie. Publicly. If this gets out many worlds sympathetic to their cause might change their minds. The Alliance has its issues but we negotiate above-board.



“Is this everyone?” Velda asked Indira.

“Yes. All maintenance personnel that are on the books now.”

“Which one was the driver of the cart with the missing battery?”

“This one. Janikowski. Ironclad alibi though. Working the entire week. Just unlucky.”

“Did the cams have anything from the plaza that day?”

“Not yet.”

“Get me a list of everyone new in the last six months.”

“Here. 38 names. Utterly unremarkable, as far as the system is concerned. Normal profiles and histories.”

“Anybody take time off?”

Sarinou felt increased urgency to get the data off-world. Her instincts told her to take bold steps. Something decisive. She put the card and a few tools into her pocket then took a walk to the market district. She did not know what she was looking for so she just kept following her feet. She passed stall after stall of electronics, clothing, and food vendors but no inspiration was forthcoming. “What could shield a card from detection?”

She had given up on the idea of transmitting the data given the response from the test signal, further compounded by the fact that the real data was over a thousand times larger. Personnel could not leave the planet, but supplies still needed to move. She found herself in front of a furniture store. She looked closer – a store full of goods made from local materials suitable for export.

“I need a gift for my mom,” she heard herself say to the clerk. “Something from the native wood.”

“Two people went on vacation that week.”

“Good.” Velda smiled. “Bring them in.”

Sarinou chose a small end table made from Orocco, a dense, nearly black hardwood from Omi's equatorial forests.

"I'm going to write a note for my mom," she said to the clerk. Feel free to help other customers for a few minutes.

"Certainly." The clerk returned to the front of the store.

Sarinou opened the small drawer and lifted it off its runners. She stuck the card to the back of the drawer with adhesive and slid it back into place. She quickly jotted a note which she folded and placed in the drawer, then flagged the clerk.

"Can you arrange shipment to this address?"

"Of course. We ship to neutral worlds all the time."

She paid cash and used an alias to sign for the receipt. After watching the package get sealed into a crate she left.

Shakira and Grace were waiting for her in her apartment.

"You are to come with us. Your handheld." Shakira held out a gloved hand.

"Um. Ok, sure. What's this about?"

"You will find out soon enough."

They deposited Sarinou in a small room with a table and two chairs. She projected calm outwardly despite her deep concern about this development. Fifteen minutes later a stern woman walked in flanked by two soldiers, both armed.

"I am Lieutenant Velda. You are going to tell me what I need to know."

"Okay. I'm not sure what that is. Do you have the right person?"

"Let's start with your recent vacation. A nice ruse, or so you thought."

"Sure, what about it? It's a nice lake."

"Cut the pretense. Who sent you?"

"I came here for the contract. Hazard pay is nearly double what I made on Gala IV. I need the money. Kind of scary being in a military state, I don't mind admitting."

A knock at the door interrupted the process. Velda showed annoyance, but nodded once to one of the guards to open the door. A small man entered and spoke quietly, pointing to a tablet. Sarinou overheard 'place was clean' but did not allow her hopes to rise.

Velda fumed. She needed to show results, but both of her top candidate suspects had clean histories and belongings. The evidence was circumstantial at best. 'Prudent to make certain', she thought as she turned back to Sarinou.

"We found evidence in your apartment," she bluffed. "You had better start talking now. I have full authority to execute spies."

Sarinou started crying. She let go all her training for a moment and was just herself, locked in a cell in an unforgiving state on a faraway planet. Civilian sobs.

"I don't know what you are talking about. I'm innocent. I do civil projects like irrigation and sanitation. Boring jobs. What do you want from me?"

Velda slammed her fist down on the table. "Where is it?"

Sarinou doubled down on the tears. "Where is what?"

Velda walked to the door. "Think about it," she said as she left.

The guards followed, leaving her alone. She was sure she was being watched. She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

"What have you got?" Stafford pointed a finger at Velda.

"Two suspects from maintenance."

"Did either have the mem card?"

"No. Both searches showed ordinary belongings. They both had cards, but held nothing more than photos and shows – nothing related to probe data, encrypted or otherwise."

"Any reason to think we have a real lead?"

Velda cursed inwardly. "No."

"I am under pressure from the Admiral to show results so they can lift the travel ban."

Velda described the criteria for finding the two suspects.

"That's good work. Might not have been someone from maintenance. Those batteries are everywhere," Stafford observed. "This is supposed to be a functioning planet, not a

military base. Lockdowns are bad for PR. Harder to recruit civilians. That is the kind of heat I am getting from above.”

“Politics,” Velda spat with disdain.

“Hold them overnight. Send another forensics team. If nothing new comes in release them in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.”

The guards brought in a cot, followed by a third carrying a tray with food. Sarinou’s heart sank, fearing a long stay.

“Do you know what this is about?” She asked the third guard before he left. He shook his head before she finished, indicating he cannot talk to her.

Shakira and Grace finally found the video from the plaza.

“There. That’s the fountain,” Shakira pointed at the screen.

“Where’s the cart?”

“Shit. Far side.”

“Zoom in.”

“Eight hours of video, you say?”

“Not going to count for much if we don’t get line-of-sight on that cart.”

Sarinou woke up to the sound of a guard entering. The soldier brought in a tray with breakfast, and more importantly coffee. She smiled meekly towards her captor as she sat up.

“I don’t suppose you were about to tell me I am being released, were you?”

The guard shook his head and opened the door just as Velda walked in. She tossed a handheld onto the breakfast tray, displaying a grainy image of a person by a maintenance cart. Sarinou picked it up. The partial face visible under the figure’s hood looked vaguely like her, but something was off.

“You are not going anywhere.” Velda pointed at the handheld.

“That picture has been altered. It is obvious even to me, a sanitation engineer. Why are you so intent on pinning whatever it was that happened on me? Aren’t you concerned that the real person is still out there?”

“That is you!” Velda yelled, still pointing at the handheld. “Stop trying to deny it. Where have you hidden it?”

“I don’t even know what ‘it’ is.” She put her face into her hands. “Whatever. It doesn’t seem to matter in this fucking place since you can lock up whoever you want.”

Velda’s eyes narrowed. Her window for holding Sarinou was closing. The raw image was too obscure to prove anything, so she had her team morph Sarinou’s face over it to see if that would crack her. Velda walked out.

The crate containing the new end table for Sarinou’s mother rolled along a conveyor towards a massive cargo bay. The belt ran through three sets of scanners, each inspecting for a different threat – people, explosives or technology. The crate sailed through the first two without delay. The conveyor stopped as it exited the third. Its onboard AI received a low-probability match on technology. The presence of the dense Orocco wood and the metal drawer bearings confused the signal. The AI reversed course to scan it again. It advanced the belt slowly for the second scan. Several dark spots appeared, the same as the first scan. The AI cross-referenced the result against others for the same material and found the same patterns – all false positives. It blinked its output light to green and resumed the conveyor at full speed.

Stafford stood with his arms crossed, one hand on his chin while looking through the glass at Sarinou. “Her bio-signs indicate the nervousness of a civilian.”

“She is either innocent or very good,” Velda added.

“We are out of time from the Admiralty. Release her. And keep tight surveillance.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sarinou blinked at the bright sunlight as she exited the nondescript building. She looked back at it and shuddered, still certain she was being watched. She walked straight to the offices of the staffing agency that found her the job, and put in for immediate transfer to

another world, citing unlawful detainment when queried. This prompted a visit from the manager.

“That is a serious allegation. Most irregular.”

“I just spent the last night being interrogated for something that I don’t even know what it is!” She stammered. “This is a breach of contract. I am leaving, and I am not paying penalties since it was not me that breached the terms. This fucking police state did.”

The manager sat stunned. “I shall have to get back to you. Please return to your job. We will send someone to follow up with you tomorrow.”

“This cannot get out. Suppress it then get her out of here. Make it so that she must sign a non-disclosure as terms for not owing penalties. And have her followed. Use our best agent.” Stafford glared at Velda, who had just come from the staffing office.

“Are we prepared to apprehend her on neutral worlds, if it comes to it?”

“If she is Alliance and chooses to act as such on a neutral world, then yes.”

“Yes, sir.”

The next day Sarinou found herself being escorted to the port along with two trunks containing her belongings. Outwardly she expressed indignation, but was deeply relieved. She had been pulled out of work mid-morning, only getting the chance to say a few quick good-byes to her co-workers. The staffing manager was there along with the same two soldiers – Shakira and Grace. The manager’s nervous disposition provided a counterbalance to the casual indifference of the soldiers.

“Of course there will be no penalties. You are free to work with us again on other worlds,” he spoke through wringing hands.

“Thank you. I am going to take some time off, then I will consider your offer.”

Sarinou felt certain her employment records here would contain no reference to the detainment.

Once at the embarkation port she saw a commotion over on the shipping dock. A stab of fear shot through her. ‘Did they find the card? What if they are letting me go because they no longer need me to find the evidence?’ One of the crates in question started barking.

‘Oh, for frak’s sake. It’s just someone bringing a dog. Your shipment wouldn’t even come to this terminal. Settle down.’

The port bustled with passengers, the ban having been lifted only the day before. She found her gate and sat down. Curious, she casually gazed around pretending to look at the shops. She spotted Shakira and Grace across the terminal through the food court.

‘Ah. Surveillance. Did they plant someone aboard?’ She wondered as she started playing a show on her handheld. She slipped on glasses but did not link them to the show. Instead she started a background program to record the faces of her fellow travellers.

Once aboard she began to feel like she might actually get to leave this world. The sight of a bulkhead actually made her smile. She passed by the galley and bought a coffee before proceeding to her seat.

The first jump into low orbit was fast – only a couple of minutes after seating. She glanced outside. Two large cruisers sat pointing all their guns at the jump zone. ‘Expecting company? They must be pretty rattled by that probe.’ The second jump followed, changing her view to that of a small, sparse world on the edge of Separatist space. The pilots communicated with the port for permission to jump into low orbit and then a docking berth.

Disembarkation proceeded normally. Passengers scattered to other connecting gates. Scanning her surroundings she played the part of someone getting her bearings, while continuing to capture faces. Five people from the first leg followed her to the next flight en route to a neutral world. Mallina. Visions of pristine beaches flooded in. ‘I can’t wait.’

Clearing customs on Mallina was a breeze. Soon she was speeding along a tree-lined avenue in a rental vehicle, considering her next move. The package was likely already delivered to her mom, so she needed to get there. But she had to drop surveillance first. Doing so overtly would tip her hand that she is an operative, a secret she wanted to avoid divulging.

The Palms Hotel came into view. ‘Never mind that Palm trees are not native to Mallina. It is near the beach.’ She smiled as she pulled into the entrance portico. Another car continued down the avenue. She zoomed her glasses to their limit, but could not get the face of the driver.

After check-in she settled into her room and set about inspecting her belongings. Both trunks contained tracking chips, as well as her shoulder bag. ‘That’s too easy.’ Further

digging revealed chips in the heels of both shoes. She had to keep the civilian facade so she could not simply drop all the chips at once. Still, this seemed odd. Simply purchasing a change of clothes would thwart this. Were they betting she would hang on to the expensive handbag? 'Or did they plant one in my food?' Without a scanner she would not know. 'Guess I will have to wait this one out. A week at the beach. Could be worse.' She thought back to the holding cell on Omi. 'A lot worse.'

During the next few days she got no hits on the facial match program, indicating that whoever was following her was very good, which troubled her. If they thought she was actually a civilian then the agent should have no qualms about simply passing on the street. This level of professionalism hinted that they knew more.

'Either that or the tracking mote inside me is working well enough that they need not bother. Don't overthink this. We will see about all this in a few days.'

Mallina was made famous by its beaches. They seem to stretch to infinity in either direction. Near-white sands and dreamy water somewhere between turquoise and azure fill the senses. Sarinou stood for several minutes on the beachside strand just taking it all in. People walked and rolled by on devices of all kinds. Small shops and restaurants lined the shore, catering to tourists and locals who call this place home. Mallina City. The main business district lay a few miles inland, yet somehow this little spur that reached the beach remained quiet. She rented a bicycle with the intention of riding until the shops ran out, then sleeping on the beach. 'I could get used to this.'

After a few days at the idyllic beach she felt rested, and a little restless. 'How about a day trip north?' She considered while looking at a map. Driving out of scanning range would force the hand of whoever was tailing her. The terrain north of Mallina City became increasingly sparse. The semi-arid climate, low vegetation and rolling hills would provide clear line-of-sight for miles. She packed a day bag and was out by mid-morning.

Cruising up the coast with the ocean to her right it was easy to lapse into pure vacation mode. 'Don't let your guard down,' she reminded herself. She double-checked that the glasses were running the facial recognition program.

Traffic thinned with each passing mile. Within an hour she was the only car visible. 'Either they are not following or they put a strong beacon on this car,' she thought as she considered the empty expanse of road behind her. Shortly thereafter she approached an



intersection. To the east lay the great promontory, a finger of land jutting into the sea, offering views from high above the water.

She slowed down, ostensibly sight-seeing while she continued to the point. Several minutes later another car took the same turn. Her hand moved unconsciously to her bag, which concealed several weapons. 'Keep it civilian. Play dumb'.

The promontory came into view as she entered the parking lot. 'Wow. That is the biggest ocean view I have ever seen.' She stepped out of her car and immediately began taking pictures. Wandering over to the railing, she stopped to read an interpretive sign just as the other car turned into the lot. When the driver got out she turned for a self-photo and aimed her glasses at him.

"FACIAL MATCH" the program displayed across her glasses. It was one of the passengers from Omi. Her heart skipped a beat. This cannot be coincidence.

Sarinou took the picture then proceeded to admire the view, while keeping her tracker in sight. He appeared normal enough. Dressed in shorts and a casual shirt he looked like a local. He stood about six feet tall, with a head full of dark hair and skin slightly lighter than her own. His age appeared to be similar. He looked at his handheld then walked over.

"Do you mind taking a picture of me with this backdrop?" He offered his handheld.

"Of course. Hard to take a bad picture today."

"Indeed. I was unprepared for this. I was told it is striking, but brushed it off as hyperbole. Turns out the descriptions fell short." He spoke with a casual ease that gently raised a few red flags.

'Undercover operative, or a player.' she thought. 'Never thought I'd be in a situation where I'd prefer the latter.' She stifled a laugh, catching his attention.

"Yeah, me too. I have seen beaches before, but never this vivid." She handed back his device.

"Visiting family or just sight-seeing? The beaches are amazing, but this place is rather out of the way from just about anywhere."

"Oh, sightseeing. It happened to be on the way for me. How about you?"

"Family in Verdu, possibly also business."

“Verdu is halfway across the continent. They must like the remoteness. What business would you have there? A new venture?”

“Would you care to talk about it over lunch?” He asked so naturally that she nearly let her guard down. Lunch in a public place should be safe enough, but he could easily put more notes into her food, resetting the clock.”

“Thanks, but I’m also here to clear my mind a bit from some past ... relations.” She left it vague. She did not want to add details that might contradict any prior part of her story.

“Well it has been nice talking to you,” she spoke while moving towards her car. A millisecond of frustration flashed across his face, followed by a professional smile.

“Of course. I understand completely. I’m Berol, if you change your mind.” He held out his hand but her instincts told her not to take it.

“Can you send it over?” She held up her handheld to distract from the missed handshake, offering to exchange numbers. He tapped a few times then she saw his contact card show up. A curious mix of emotions washed through her. Despite knowing the risks, she wanted to take him up on his offer.

“I’m Sarinou. I – I don’t know.” She let some of her real feelings bleed into that statement. “But I will think about it.” She gave him a vulnerable smile, then walked away.

“Absolutely nothing,” Berol spoke while sitting in his vehicle. Sarinou had driven off a few minutes earlier. “She is either very skilled or very civilian. I felt empathy for her. Operatives are not known for that level of depth.”

“Do not underestimate her. Anyone that could come to a stronghold of ours and get away again is no middling talent. How long until the passive trackers leave her system?”

“Two days. Give or take.”

“Call Janssen.”

Berol sighed. Calling Janssen was tantamount to defeat. He had wanted to complete this mission on his own. “Yes, sir.”

Sarinou drove some distance farther north until she was certain he was not nearby. She was oddly unsettled by the interaction. She pulled off on a dirt road and stopped the car. She stepped out, raising a hand towards the glare of the late morning sun.

‘That was a completely normal interaction. What is getting under my skin?’ As she paced around and the adrenaline wore off realization dawned. She had wanted to accept his offer, but not for professional reasons. He is precisely the sort of person she would want to meet back in normal life.

‘Oboy. Those are dangerous emotions.’ Her mind wandered. ‘Could I disappear for a bit, send the data, then come back?’

Just then an idea struck her. A little honesty might be the ticket. She returned to her hotel and checked out, but asked the hotel to hold onto her bags for her return. Then she composed a note.

‘Berol - I enjoyed meeting you today, perhaps more than I am ready to admit. I still need some time to find myself again. I must pursue my need for solitude, and will be embarking on a retreat for a few days. I will return to the shore thereafter. If you are still around I might reconsider lunch. -- Sarinou’

Berol read with mixed emotions. He smiled at the thought of seeing her again, but cringed at the fact that she was gone – as in ‘no longer traceable.’ He had called Janssen, who had arranged on short notice a new cook in the restaurant she frequented. But she would not dine there tonight.

She had also ingested some over-the-counter medications that helped pass the trackers a couple of days early, but not early enough to arouse suspicion. Further, en route to Mallina City she swapped vehicles under the pretense of needing off-road capability. Completely civilian tactics.

Berol dreaded the next conversation with his superiors.

“Sir, there have been some developments.”

“Hi mom. It’s me. I’m in town, on my way over. Yes, I know. I never know in advance. Transport took me nearby so I thought I’d drop – what? Yes it might be related to the package. Did you like it? Oh great. See you soon.”

Vera Odette lived in a small dwelling on the outskirts of Mallina City, in an area of rolling hills that rise towards a distant mountain range. Hardy plants dot the ruddy landscape

along the road, their low forms casting long shadows in the waning daylight. By the time she reached the driveway night had fallen.

Her mom's house is just as she remembered it. Vera relocated here ten years ago, but as far as Sarinou could tell she had changed nothing.

"Why would I change anything?" She replied when Sarinou commented. "I came here to connect to a new place, not bring the old one along," she said with mock indignation. Sarinou laughed as they hugged.

"Now lemme gues. You've gotta do something spy-like first, then we can visit for real, that right?"

Sarinou shrugged. "I don't get to control these things."

"I know, I know. I'll be in the kitchen."

Berol strolled the beach, still angry about losing the trail and the rebuke from command. he was never fond of Stafford in the first place. He liked him even less now. Berol had tracked her as far as the rental agency, and had put out the information on the new vehicle, but without a tracker it was just fishing. He did not expect to find anything until she returned. If she returned. And by then it would be too late, assuming she is an operative. A few hours unsupervised would be sufficient for her to send the data, let alone a few days.

'There are worse places to cool one's heels for a few days,' he mused as he walked into a trendy beach-side cafe. Just then his handheld chimed.

'Thirty-two personal packages delivered from Omi to Mallina since travel ban lifted.' A number small enough to be tracked.

'Still useless. Too late. Likely the data from that card is already off-world. Maybe I can still find out what its contents pertain to.'

Sarinou opened the drawer and found the mem card, then started breathing again. Within a minute she had established a secure connection over the public network and started the upload. in parallel she recorded a message to its recipients.

"Agent Onza mission report." She spoke in a hushed tone, a habit any time she used her confidential code-name. "Data from probe VR91X Irukanji retrieved. Probe in-tact. Ablative coating removed successfully. Memory on probe re-encrypted with key file also contained in transmission. Attention General Ozaku immediate review. Over."

A few seconds later it was done. She wiped the mem card clean, then sat staring at it. Done. 'I can be a civilian now for a few days.'

She walked into the kitchen to join in preparing dinner, an old family recipe from the Carribean region on Earth.

Later that night an unremarkable rental car drove by. The driver slowed down, recorded the street address and her rental car plate, then continued on its way.

Sarinou spent a few days catching up with Vera, then returned to the coast. She was not sure what she expected to happen, and was not even sure if she was acting against her better judgment. Once back at the hotel she pinged Berol.

'Back in town. Time for dinner?'

Ten minutes later the reply came. 'I bet he read it immediately, then sat on it for nine minutes to appear casual,' she giggled to herself.

'Ringlets at seven ok?'

'See you there.'

She walked over a bit early to case the place. While she did want to see Berol, she did not fancy the idea of being whisked off in a van to god-knows-where. Thirty minutes later she concluded there was no obvious extraction team present. There was the risk that a handful of employees were operatives. Should she switch venues at the last minute? 'No, I'm a civilian now with no active mission.' She walked in a couple minutes before seven.

A young host greeted her from a counter, behind which hung a large sculpture of the sea creature from which the restaurant derived its name – a giant squid-like animal armed with tentacles and stingers. The circular ringlets around the stingers are a delicacy.

"I wasn't sure we'd ever meet again," came a voice from behind her left shoulder.

"Honestly, neither was I. Still a bit shy about it all, I don't mind saying."

"Fair enough. Let's just enjoy dinner."

"That sounds nice."

Berol was both engaging and funny. Oh, and attractive. She kept wondering if this was a good idea, but she had deprived herself of so many 'normal' opportunities during her career she felt like indulging for once. 'Maybe that self-restraint is what kept you alive,' she chided.

An hour in she realized she was probably setting herself up for a hard fall. This is not going to turn into a relationship, much to the chagrin of her growing feelings for him. She gazed distantly out the window.

"You Ok there?"

"Yeah. Just getting overly philosophical, perhaps."

"Go on."

"I like you. But I will be leaving soon. I can never seem to get all the variables to line up."

"Just come back to the present and don't worry about all that."

"I suppose you are right." She turned to face him.

"I do have one question for you though."

"Ok. Shoot."

"Why did you come back? Your mission has concluded."

Sarinou's heart stopped for an instant. 'How?' Sadness descended down her face. She knew her cover was blown, but was impacted harder by the emotional jolt.

"To see you. I have nothing to hide at this point."

Berol smiled a deep, genuine smile as he reached over the table to hold her hand.

"Sorry for bringing it up. I had to know tonight was not part of the operation."

She smiled and wiped a tear, then squeezed his hand back.

General Ozaku reviewed the data, then whistled low. "Got you this time."

Sarinou and Berol walked along the beach just after sunrise. The ocean breeze gently swirled around them, infusing the salty mist with floral scents from local flowers. Just then his handheld chimed.

He read the missive then exhaled, earning him a curious glance.

“They want me to use you to find out what the probe data contains. To mitigate the impact, no doubt.”

“Knowing won’t matter at this point. It’ll be out today, probably at noon.”

Berol looked at his watch. “Care to give me a few hours head start?” He asked only half in jest.

“I’ll trade you for how you found out about me.”

“Deal. Let’s hear it.”

“Not yet. We still have a few hours. I’ll drop something before it goes out.”

“I hope you drop a lot of things before noon.”

She took his hand, blushing fiercely.

“Last question about work. Why do you do it? Be a Separatist, I mean. It seems such a police state.”

“It is not always like that. Imagine your side’s response if the reciprocal had happened.” He paused to look out to sea.

“It’s a fine line between removing bureaucracy and becoming a rogue state.”

“A line I do not think we have crossed. Not yet anyway.”

“So there’s no chance I can convince you to change your views on that and come over to the good guys?” she asked with a small grin.

“Was that the ‘hard sell’ just there?” He laughed.

“Exactly. And with that I am done talking shop. Let’s get coffee.”

A couple hours later Sarinou lay on her side, stroking his hair. She glanced at the clock.

“Sorry to break the mood. Do you want that data point now?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I only have two words on it – Oculus Nebula.”

“Oh god.” Berol sat bolt upright. “You have to go. As soon as I send that they will send orders to immediately apprehend.”

“Even though an hour later it won’t matter?”

“They won’t know that. And be advised it will not just be me. Every operative on-world will stop at nothing to collar you. Go somewhere safe. Now.”

“Shit. Sorry to leave like this. What about my cover?”

“We tracked a packed to a house that you parked your replacement rental car at.”

‘I hope mom’s not too mad when she has to move on short notice.’ She bit her lip.

She kissed him as she got up. “You know how to get a hold of me again if you change your mind.”

“I’d like to get a hold of you again even if I don’t.”

She laughed and hugged him good-bye.

Sarinou was dressed and out the door in two minutes and motoring towards Mallina City and an Allied safe house. Five minutes later Berol sent the message. The reply was instantaneous, as expected. He acknowledged the order, replying that he would cover city center as the lead agent.

An hour later when the news broke he stopped. For the first time since joining he seriously questioned his decision. He looked at his handheld, not quite sure what to do.